

In the Shadow of the Cross

*A Biblical Theology of
Persecution and Discipleship*

Glenn M. Penner

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In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship

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Contents

PREFACE	7
1. OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE	11
In the Beginning: Insights from the Pentateuch	11
The Biblical Basis for Human Rights and Religious Liberty	11
The Biblical Basis for Persecution	22
Cain and Abel	27
Noah	30
Lot	30
Abraham	31
Isaac	32
Egypt's Oppression of Israel	32
Blessing and Cursing in Deuteronomy	32
The Example of History: Insights from the Historical Books	34
The Old Testament View of History	34
Suffering as Discipline	39
<i>Discipline as Punishment</i>	39
<i>Discipline as a Means to Spiritual Maturity</i>	40
Suffering Specifically for God's Sake	41
Poets and Philosophers: Insights from the Wisdom Literature	42
Job	42
Psalms	47
<i>Psalms Used in the New Testament in Regards to Persecution</i>	48
<i>Psalm 22</i>	48
<i>Psalm 31</i>	50
<i>Psalm 34</i>	51
<i>Psalm 35</i>	52

<i>Psalm 41</i> .....	.52
<i>Psalms 42,43</i> .....	.52
<i>Psalm 44</i> .....	.52
<i>Psalm 69</i> .....	.53
<i>Psalm 91</i> .....	.53
<i>Psalm 116</i> .....	.54
<i>Psalm 118</i> .....	.54
<i>How the Early Church Used Psalms in Their Discussion of Persecution and Discipleship</i> .....	.56
<i>The Imprecatory (Cursing) Psalms</i> .....	.70
Ecclesiastes .....	.72
Proverbs .....	.73
Thus Says the Lord: Insights from the Prophets .....	.76
Isaiah .....	.76
Jeremiah .....	.78
Daniel .....	.81
2. THE REVELATION OF GOD IN CHRIST .....	.85
God as Sufferer .....	.85
The Doctrine of Impassibility .....	.88
Anthropomorphic Metaphors .....	.90
Suffering Incarnationally .....	.91
Suffering Relationally .....	.97
Suffering Sympathetically .....	.99
God as Self-Giver .....	.100
Messianic Expectations .....	.104
Definition of Messiah .....	.104
The Expectations of First-Century Judaism .....	.104
The Expectations of the Disciples .....	.106
<i>Peter (Matthew 16)</i> .....	.106
<i>John the Baptist (John 1; Matthew 11)</i> .....	.108
<i>The Transfiguration (Matthew 17; Mark 9; Luke 9)</i> .....	.110
<i>The Ascension (Acts 1; Matthew 28)</i> .....	.114
The Strategy of Jesus .....	.115

The Call of Discipleship, The Call of the Cross	116
Matthew	117
<i>Matthew 5:10–12</i>	117
<i>Matthew 10:16–42</i>	119
<i>Matthew 16:21–28</i>	135
Mark	141
Luke	145
<i>The Subjects of Persecution in Luke</i>	146
<i>The Theological Teaching of Persecution in Luke</i>	147
John	150
3. ACTS OF THE APOSTLES: PROCLAMATION AND PERSECUTION	155
Persecution in the Book of Acts	155
Overview of Acts	155
Persecution in Acts	160
The Theological Teachings of Persecution in Acts	163
Final Observations	165
4. TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES	169
Paul	169
1 and 2 Thessalonians	169
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>	169
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>	173
1 and 2 Corinthians	177
<i>1 Corinthians</i>	178
<i>2 Corinthians</i>	184
Romans	194
Galatians	202
Ephesians	202
<i>Ephesians 3:1</i>	203
<i>Ephesians 4:1</i>	204
<i>Ephesians 6:10–20</i>	204
Philippians	206

<i>Philippians 1</i>	206
<i>Philippians 2</i>	208
<i>Philippians 3</i>	209
Colossians	212
Philemon	215
1 Timothy	216
2 Timothy	217
<i>2 Timothy 1</i>	218
<i>2 Timothy 2</i>	221
<i>2 Timothy 3:10–13</i>	222
<i>2 Timothy 4:6–18</i>	224
Hebrews	226
Hebrews 11	228
Hebrews 12	229
Hebrews 13	232
James	233
Peter	235
1 Peter	235
2 Peter	247
John	247
1 John	247
2 John	248
3 John	248
Revelation	250
BIBLIOGRAPHY	261
END NOTES	279

Preface

“Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.”

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

The link among suffering, martyrdom, and discipleship is one that only gradually became apparent to me during almost fifteen years of study. I began this study as a sermon, responding to a time of suffering and trial during my first year of seminary when, in obedience to the call of God, my young family and I found ourselves literally living by faith day-by-day to meet our needs. We knew that God had called us to go to Manitoba to study, but like many of my generation, we really did not understand that obeying Christ often means suffering and sacrifice. As the year progressed, by God’s grace we learned this. As I spoke in various churches throughout southern Manitoba that year, as part-time pulpit supply, I shared what God was teaching us through His Word, the writings of others such as Francis and Edith Schaeffer and Charles Olrich, and the instruction of seminary professors such as Dr. Ed Neufeld. My understanding deepened as I undertook a study of the doctrine of divine impassibility in my third year of seminary. I also witnessed the faithfulness of my brother and his wife as they struggled to come to grips with trusting God while raising a severely handicapped son despite the comments and accusations from many well-meaning “friends” (Job’s friends still live!). By that time, I had joined the pastoral staff of a church in southern Manitoba. As I was privileged to share with this congregation what I was learning, I realized that these were truths for which God’s people were hungry and which helped fill intellectual, emotional, and spiritual gaps that they were only partially aware of. It was as if pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, as they gained a better perspective on suffering.

In 1997, I joined the staff of Canadian office of The Voice of the Martyrs, an organization dedicated to assisting persecuted Christians around the world. Among my responsibilities was the role of being the mission’s chief spokesman at churches

and conferences, with the added privilege of visiting persecuted Christians in nations worldwide. As I studied the Word of God in the regular course of my duties as VOM's Communications Director, it became increasingly clear to me that there were aspects to suffering that I had never seen or been exposed to in my prior studies. Asked to convey the biblical teaching on persecution to Christian leaders undergoing suffering in Colombia made me realize that much of what I had learned and taught in previous years, while not inaccurate, was inadequate. It became increasingly clear to me that the New Testament, in particular, is not overly concerned to answer the question of suffering in general (i.e., suffering due to living in a fallen world). This is assumed. Rather, most of the passages dealing with suffering in the New Testament had to do with suffering because of *righteousness*. As I studied many of the classic books on suffering, I could not help but notice that this is hardly ever stressed. This is to be expected, I suppose, since Christians in the West have little or no experience with persecution per se. However, it seems to me that the rush of today's preachers to find practical ways of applying the biblical text to modern-day concerns (however well-intentioned) often gets in the way of serious biblical study and accurate understanding of the original intent of the authors. Respected Lutheran scholar Krister Stendahl worded it this way:

There is no greater threat to serious biblical studies than a forced demand for "relevance." We must have patience and faith enough to listen and seek out the original's meaning. If this is not done, biblical study suffers and may, indeed, come up with false and faulty conclusions and interpretations.¹

Because the biblical texts on persecution cannot readily be applied to a setting where there is little or no persecution, the tendency seems to be for preachers to misapply these passages to situations of general physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering. This misapplication has subsequently been turned around upon the text itself. Hence, the application influences the interpretation, resulting in the typical Bible student in the West never even suspecting that the texts that deal with pain and suffering might be dealing with suffering for righteousness' sake rather than suffering because of sin.

The Western hegemony on theological and biblical studies and published literature has only magnified and propagated this unintended misunderstanding or neglect of the scriptural link between persecution and discipleship. This became increasingly clear to me as I met with church leaders in societies where persecution was the norm. Like their Western counterparts, they often evidenced a tragic lack of understanding of the scriptural teachings on the subject. They looked to me to supply such answers—answers that I did not have, given my theological background and training. My prior study on suffering, however, did give me a place to begin.

The text you have in your hands is my attempt to remedy this need for a clearer understanding of the biblical teaching on persecution and discipleship. It is written primarily for church leaders in religiously restricted nations in the hopes of helping equip them to minister more effectively to their congregations. It is written, secondarily, for believers living in societies with religious freedom, in the hopes of correcting misunderstandings of the biblical text, and providing pastoral help to those undergoing suffering of a more general nature. I am not without sympathy for such suffering. I myself was diagnosed in 2002 with a chronic, incurable form of leukemia. This study has helped me to appreciate the grace of God to a far greater degree, as I have learned to confess that the God who upholds the persecuted is the same God who upholds all of His children in their time of need. This, I believe, is appropriate application. We must not, however, lose sight of the original intent of the biblical text. The Bible (especially the New Testament) was written by persecuted believers to persecuted believers. This context cannot be ignored without it having profoundly negative implications for how we read and apply the Bible and how we follow Christ individually and corporately. I have included in the text a number of sidebars containing supplementary articles, which I hope will enhance the reader's learning on this subject. As they are not a part of the main text, they may be ignored or set aside to be read later.

To the end that this study furthers God's kingdom and helps equip His messengers to carry out His plans, I will be grateful to God. As is inevitable with a study of this nature, certain conclusions will be drawn to which the reader may take exception. I should make it clear that the opinions expressed in this analysis are not necessarily the official theological position of The Voice of the Martyrs. VOM is a non-denominational faith mission and so any comments in this study that reflect a particular doctrinal bias are mine alone.

I would be remiss if I neglected to thank the Board of Directors and Executive Director Klaas Brobbel of The Voice of the Martyrs in Canada for allowing me time away from my normal responsibilities to serve as Visiting Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Oklahoma Wesleyan University (OWU) in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, in the fall of 2003. It was at this time that I was able to devote considerable time to work on this study in preparation for class lectures on the subject. I owe many thanks to Dr. Graham Walker, Academic Vice-President of Oklahoma Wesleyan University, for inviting me to teach at OWU and for encouraging me in this study. Thanks go out as well to Nellie Brobbel and Tom White for proofreading most of this manuscript and offering a number of valuable suggestions that helped me to clarify several points. I would be remiss if I did not express my sincere gratitude to my editor, Lynn Copeland of the Genesis Group. I have been told that an editor can

be a writer's best friend, if you will listen to her. Lynn's work has been evidence of that. Thanks are owed, too, to the faculty and staff at Colombo Theological Seminary (CTS) in Colombo, Sri Lanka, who invited me to teach on this subject in the summer of 2003. Had it not been for the invitation of these two schools, I doubt that I would have been able to dedicate the time necessary for this study. Many thanks are extended to my students at CTS and OWU who willingly and enthusiastically engaged in this study. I am sure that they had no idea what they were getting into when they registered for the course. I pray that God will raise up from their midst cross-carrying messengers of the cross-centered gospel. Last of all (and certainly not least), I owe a debt of gratitude to Denita, my wife, and to Joel, Rebecca, and David, my children. Their gracious support and love have upheld me far more than they know. My ministry with the Persecuted Church demands significantly more time away from them than is normal. They have sacrificed much for the sake of the kingdom. May their rewards be great in heaven.

CHAPTER

1 Old Testament Perspective

IN THE BEGINNING: INSIGHTS FROM THE PENTATEUCH

Genesis is the book of beginnings. It introduces foundational concepts upon which the rest of the biblical revelation builds. This is also true for the subject of persecution and discipleship. In particular, the first few chapters of Genesis provide a basis for a biblical perspective on the importance of human rights and religious liberty, and the reasons for persecution.

The Biblical Basis for Human Rights and Religious Liberty

The Christian view of human rights and religious liberty is largely based, not on a set of specific biblical proof texts, but on a biblical view of mankind. The Bible uniquely describes humans as being created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26,27). This has profound implications for how Christians view human rights.

1. God as Giver and Guardian of Rights

Being made in the image of God, man is, by his very nature, responsible to God to obey Him and to be in relationship with Him. God, in turn, chooses to act in man's behalf and to be in relationship with mankind. His character provides the foundation for laws and values that allow man, the bearer of the divine image, to have freedom without chaos.

Such freedom is not found simply by obeying divine commands.¹ The place to begin is *not* with the assertion that “this is what the Bible says and therefore we must obey.” We must, of course, be careful to take seriously God's revelation in the Scriptures. But God's revelation is first and foremost a revelation of Himself. The

basis of all biblical commands is the character of God, whose character we are to reflect as image-bearers. God expects us to act toward others as He acts toward us.

Even a cursory examination of the scriptural record reveals a God who is particularly concerned with the minimal civil rights of people belonging to vulnerable groups. The Mosaic Law, for example, surpassed other contemporary civil codes in its affirmation of fair and equitable treatment of all citizens regardless of their social status. The right to life, to be unharmed, is intrinsic to each human life, created as we were in a body of flesh and blood. Protection from being denied the necessities of life, theft of personal property, physical abuse, abortion, and being taken hostage all find biblical support, as requirements of God's justice for those created in His image.

A Christian view of human rights, therefore, locates them within a framework where God is both the giver of responsibility and the guardian of rights. Humans have rights because God cares for them, protects them, and demands justice for them. In that sense, He gives us rights and guards them.

2. The Right to Be Respected

As a bearer of the image of God, though marred by sin, individuals are worthy of respect and possessors of dignity. To disrespect the image bearer is to disrespect the one whose image is being represented (James 3:9). This is foundational to a biblical worldview and a Christian view of human rights. In looking for the basis for the rights of humans we should not, as Paul Marshall notes, look for a self-contained, inherent dignity or for the presence of a supposed defining human characteristic such as will, reason, or conscience. Instead we should look first to our status as God's creatures.²

Neither Islam nor communism, on the other hand, acknowledges that man is created in the image of God.³ For this reason, they do not have a basis for determining why human beings have rights to freedom of belief and have therefore been consistently unable or unwilling to protect these rights. Freedoms, under such systems, become those rights that are given to individuals or groups rather than rights that are acknowledged as being intrinsic to humanity. Rights, in the Christian perspective, are not given by any human institution but are acknowledged and upheld as being granted by God.

3. The Right to Be Wrong

In Exodus 22:21, we find the Lord commanding Israel not to oppress the foreigner. It is significant that this admonition immediately follows the Lord's instructions to execute those who worship other gods. At first glance, this may appear contradictory. What is apparent, however, is that while the Israelites were not to worship for-

eign deities, they were not to oppress the foreigner himself. This implies permission for the foreigner to continue his religious practice in Israel. Only when the foreigner's religious practice involved such heinous customs as child sacrifice was this religious liberty to be restricted (Leviticus 20:2). God's people were to keep themselves separate from false religious systems of their day, yet without violating the rights of those whom they knew to be wrong.⁴

As Marshall points out in *A Christian Defense of Religious Liberty*, Israel was never enjoined to conduct a crusade or holy war against foreign nations beyond their borders. Later commands to root out idolatry were directed against the practices of Israel itself. Other nations were free to order their religious life, even though their beliefs and practices were specifically and categorically branded as false.⁵ Still we must remember that Israel was expected to be a blessing for all nations and a testimony to the truth of God.

Exemplified by the Creator's willingness to allow false religious beliefs to continue unpunished for the present, Christians uphold the right for the individual or group to be wrong. Therein lies the difference between evangelism and proselytism.⁶ Religious coercion is a violation of an individual's God-given right to choose one's own belief system. Even if a religious practice is deemed incorrect, morally repugnant, and inconsistent with the general and special revelation of God, so long as it does not violate the rights of others, it should be not interfered with.

This does not negate the importance of apologetics and evangelism. As God's image bearers, we are His messengers, seeking to restore individuals to a right relationship with their Creator. Yet, reflecting God's image, we do so through persuasion, not compulsion. Being created in the image of God calls us to use methods that respect the rights of others to be wrong, if they persist in upholding their beliefs.

Countries that have historically been influenced by a strong Christian worldview (and Protestantism in particular) have been demonstrated to maintain the highest levels of religious liberty for their citizens.⁷ Of course, such freedoms have not always been consistently upheld. The brutal persecution of Anabaptists during the Reformation is only one tragic example of how Christians have failed to consistently practice a biblical view of religious liberty. Evangelicals continue to be persecuted in parts of Latin America in the name of Roman Catholicism, just as they do in Ethiopia in the name of Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Recent developments in western Europe should cause Christians great concern, as countries such as Belgium, Austria, Germany, and France have passed legislation restricting the activities and existence of new, non-orthodox religions or "sects." In their antipathy to and ignorance of these new faiths, many in these societies tend to pigeonhole evangelical minorities together with groups that are genuinely dangerous. In eastern Europe, governments

are increasingly restricting the activities and existence of religious groups that may potentially challenge the hegemony of the historically dominant one. It must be asserted, however, that such actions are not the fruit of a truly biblical view of human rights but violations of it. Christianity must not be judged by the actions of its inconsistent followers but by the actions, teachings, and revealed character of its Founder.

4. The Lack of Individual Autonomy

The individual, being created in the image of God, is not autonomous, because God in Scripture is revealed as being triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The implication for individuals made in the image of God is that complementary relationships are intrinsic to what it means to be human, just as God's revealed reality (His "ontology") is constituted by complementary relationships between the members of the Trinity. In the same way, man cannot be an autonomous individual. To be created in the image of God means that to exist is to be relational. Therefore any concept of human rights must be seen in the context of man as a relational being. We cannot act any way that we like, without regard for others. Rights are not simply individualistic but pertain to the individual within relationships.

5. The Right to Communal Relationships

In the same way, human beings, created in the image of a triune God, cannot be rightfully deprived of communal relationships with others. Religion, in particular, is intrinsically communal, for it is God's ideal that persons live in communion with each other, the world, and their God.⁸ It is not good for people to be alone (Genesis 2:18). When religion is forcibly privatized, it has ceased to be recognized as a right, and religious liberty has historically been considered the first right from which all others stem.

6. The Basis for Equality

Being created in the image of God also gives real insights into the true nature of equality. The equality of women with men is built into the *imago dei* assertion, for example. All humans are equally reflections of God, regardless of whether they worship Him or not. Our very nature contradicts any Orwellian concept that "all are equal but some are more equal than others."

7. The Basis for Difference

This equality, however, is to be understood in the context of the image of the Trinity. As the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have equality, they also have complementary roles and interpersonal relationships among the Trinity. This intercommunica-

tion among the three does not mean that they are not distinguishable from each other. Equality does not equal sameness. Being created in the image of the triune God makes each person unique.⁹ While all humans are equal, they do not have to be the same.

8. The Basis for Freedom

The nature of the Trinity also reflects freedom; for example, the members of the Trinity freely love each other. In the Gospel accounts of the events that transpired in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see the Son having to choose whether He will obey the Father. He struggles. It is not His desire to die, but He freely chooses to do that which He knows is right. While freedom of choice was part of our original, created state, as fallen human beings we no longer can claim to have a truly “free will.” Paul tells us in Romans 1 that we consistently choose the wrong and even the right we do choose is often tarnished with ulterior motives. While some would argue that this must require an irresistible act on God’s part, it seems to me that a better explanation is found in what may be described as “prevenient grace,” whereby God frees our will to obey Him and to choose to follow Him. Hence, I believe that it is far more accurate to refer to the “freed will,” rather than to “free will.” The former still gives the full glory to God; the latter does not take sin seriously enough and makes it sound like the mind was unaffected by the Fall and sin.¹⁰

Still, we yearn for freedom that can and should provide the environment for unrestricted practice of worship and propagation of the faith. As we shall see later in our study, however, in a fallen world, this expression of freedom often leads to increased persecution and restriction of our religious freedom by opponents. In all areas, the full expression of human rights and religious freedom, as described above, has been profoundly impacted by the Fall. This is not to say that the Edenic ideal should be discarded. The free expression of one’s beliefs is to be upheld and promoted as God’s intended plan for His image bearers. As we have noted, in societies where biblical Christianity has had a greater influence on societal norms and values, we catch a glimpse of the Edenic ideal. Even there, however, as in the rest of the fallen world, this freedom is constantly threatened and never experienced consistently. As we shall see in our discussion of Genesis 3, the process of restoring God’s creation to its intended state will be one of conflict. Ideally, religious freedom is a good thing. In this fallen world, however, the absence of religious persecution can be a sign that the process of restoration has slowed or stalled as God’s messengers stop being His agents of reconciliation in a hostile world. Hence, Christians would work to establish and maintain religious liberty. This is God’s ideal, but not for our own comfort and not at the expense of our evangelistic zeal.

From what has been said above, it is apparent that if anyone should have a high sense of human rights, it should be Bible-believing Christians. Sadly, we often do not. In fact, some are prepared to dismiss the concept of human rights all together, failing to recognize that by doing so, one is violating the very nature of what it means to be created in the image of God.

At best, the subject of human rights is one that evangelicals have tended to shy away from. To defend the rights of others seems to be somehow unspiritual. After all, it may be rightfully pointed out that Christians are called to give up their rights just as Christ did in His incarnation (Philippians 2:3–11). The ugliness of seeing followers of Jesus Christ fight for their personal rights (especially with each other) has brought disrepute upon the Body of Christ. Rather than saying, “See how they love one another,” the watching world has more often been able to comment, with a smirk, “See how they fight one another.” Seeking to remedy this unfortunate situation by presenting a positive, alternative witness to a skeptical society, some Christians have concluded that we have no legitimate rights to fight for.

I believe a more appropriate approach would be to affirm that often neglected distinction between private and public rights. Privately, Christians are not to take the law into their own hands (Matthew 5:38–42), but this does not remove the right and the God-given obligation of the State to uphold the laws of the land and punish wrongdoers (Romans 13:4).

In the same way, Christians may choose to give up their rights, but this does not presuppose that the rights are not legitimate and that others can (and perhaps should) uphold them. Nor does this give us the excuse to not uphold the rights of others. There are times (probably more often than we are comfortable admitting) when the call to follow Christ and to conform to His image requires that we renounce the rights that we may *rightfully* possess. If we have no rights, as some would say, then renouncing them would be meaningless. Giving up illegitimate rights can hardly be considered a sacrifice.

Similarly, to refuse to uphold the rights of others simply because we have personally chosen to renounce these rights is unjust and a direct violation of scriptural commands to defend the weak and oppressed and to speak on their behalf.¹¹ It is a cruel person who says, “Since I refuse to uphold my rights, I will bind you to my decision as well by letting you suffer in silence and refuse to raise a finger to help you.”

Nor does the separation of private and public rights imply that Christians should not, at times, stand up for their own rights as citizens. The apostle Paul exemplified this when he felt free to either forgo his rights or use them. On at least three occasions Luke records Paul exercising his rights as a Roman citizen as a

defense for his religious beliefs.¹² The advancement of God's kingdom would seem to be the biblical criterion of whether to renounce or uphold one's rights. Unfortunately, the criterion we typically employ often has more to do with the advancement of our own personal agendas. Hence, it must be clearly understood that maintaining that Christians, together with all other human beings, do have intrinsic, inalienable human rights does not justify selfish, self-seeking behavior. Indeed, the opposite is true. A biblical view of mankind should increase our concern for our fellow Christians who suffer for no other reason than that they are followers of Jesus Christ. Hearing of innocent men, women, and children being tortured to death simply for reasons of faith should fill us with a sense of outrage and injustice, as we join them in crying out, "How long, O Lord, until you come to judge the world and avenge these deaths?" (Revelation 6:10).

On the other hand, we must not limit our concern only for the religious liberties of those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should be concerned when we hear of the persecution of non-Christian groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Hare Krishna, or Scientologists because in many cases, evangelicals are often misconstrued as being similar to these groups in the minds of the legislators and the general public. But whereas these groups seldom suffer persecution quietly without their co-religionists from North America, in particular, rising to their support and lobbying on their behalf, Christians in many parts of the world often suffer persecution in virtual obscurity and anonymity.

This is not because Christians are persecuted less than other religious groups. Rather, the opposite is true. In 2003, an estimated 166,000 Christians were put to death because of their identification with and witness for Jesus Christ.¹³ No other religious group can claim numbers anywhere near this amount. In 1998, 82 percent of those killed worldwide because of their religious convictions were Christians. The World Evangelical Fellowship estimates that 200 million Christians worldwide live under the daily threat of imprisonment, torture, or execution because of their faith. An additional 400 million live in societies with laws that specifically discriminate against Christians.

Persecution is often cited by non-orthodox religious groups such as the Bahai, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses as a sign of the truthfulness of their religion. If this was a valid argument (and I am not convinced that it is), Christianity would have no close competitors in this regard.

What is puzzling is the lack of demonstrable concern expressed by many North American evangelical Christians toward their brothers and sisters around the world. While many reasons could be cited,¹⁴ I am convinced that part of the cause is a direct result of a relative dearth of careful thinking concerning religious liberty and

human rights in the evangelical community. We have tended to leave the field to our mainline church counterparts and condemned them (and the issue itself) when they mistakenly confuse religious tolerance with religious endorsement. With the spread of postmodernist thought in our society and the corresponding weakening of moral and objective truth in the minds of many, even among evangelicals, the role of apologetics and evangelism has increasingly been disparaged as inappropriate actions for Christians in a multicultural society such as Canada's. Evangelicals must begin to do the hard work of reclaiming a part of our legacy—the field of human rights.

Having established the foundation for human rights and religious liberty in Genesis 1 and 2, we must, of necessity, continue reading through Genesis 3, which explains why things are not as they ought to be.

Religious Freedom Under Islam

By Henrik Ertner Rasmussen, General Secretary of the Danish European Mission
(www.daneu.dk)¹⁵

In this personal commentary contributed to Forum 18 News Service, Henrik Ertner Rasmussen, General Secretary of the Danish European Mission, draws on his experience of living and studying in the Muslim world to examine how Islam understands religious freedom. He believes Muslims' attitudes to religious freedom have been shaped by the concept of Dhimmitude, under which proselytism by non-Muslims was banned, and Jews and Christians have become second-class citizens with only limited rights. He notes that a "religious supermarket" with a free choice of different products and brands has not been introduced in the Muslim world, but sees signs of hope that intellectuals and religious officials in the Muslim world are discussing new ideas openly and are suggesting reforms which could lead to greater religious liberty.

At a conference on Christian-Muslim dialogue, the question of religious freedom came up. "In our country, the Christians have more religious freedom than the Muslims," one Muslim leader declared, "because they have the right to convert, while Muslims haven't." At another conference, where the topic was aired, the Muslims in one working group agreed with the Christians that, of course, there should be religious freedom. When challenged by the Christian representatives, who said that it would mean that Muslims should have as much right to convert to another religion as Christians, the response was: "Of course not!"

The question of religious freedom under Islam has historically been connected with the concept of Dhimmitude. In regions conquered by Muslims after the death of the prophet Muhammad, Christians and Jews as so-called "People of the Book" were allowed to keep

at least most of their church buildings and synagogues, conduct their worship and other religious activities, including burials, according to their own rites, and they enjoyed a certain autonomy concerning matters under canonical law. They would enjoy the protection of the Muslim government provided they paid the Jizya, a poll-tax levied on every member of the Dhimmi community (a Dhimmi being a member of a group under the Dhimma, or pact of conditional protection).

However, as soon as Muslims were involved in any legal dispute with the Dhimmi community, Sharia, or Islamic law, would be applied. Non-Muslims were allowed freedom of worship, but not of missionary activity. Proselytism among Muslims was forbidden.

The concept of Dhimmitude has had an overwhelming and pervasive influence in societies which have for centuries been part of the Muslim world. This influence is still felt today, even though the express outward rules that made discrimination against Dhimmis mandatory have long disappeared. Under these rules Christians and Jews were obliged to wear special clothing that made them easily distinguishable from Muslims. They were not allowed to ride horses, only donkeys, and had to adopt a humble and abject demeanor.

Concerning conversion from Islam to another religion, Islamic law usually forbids this, calling it *rida*, or apostasy. A Hadith, a record of a saying or action of the Prophet or his followers, records that he once said: "If a man changes his religion, kill him." Later traditions have added some conditions, and a widely accepted understanding is that an apostate male should be persuaded three times to return to Islam and, failing this, be put to death. An apostate female should also be persuaded three times, failing which she should be locked up for the rest of her life. The more modernistic view, shared by senior Muslim scholars in Egypt, is that an apostate is granted the rest of his life to repent and return to Islam. Meanwhile, the government seems intent on making life as difficult as possible for the convert.

The Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the International Islamic Council in 1981, includes sections on freedom of religion, but the Arabic text, which differs on several points from the English one, includes the traditional prohibition against leaving the *umma*, the fellowship of Islam. This section is omitted in the English text.

The topic of religious freedom has been widely discussed in many parts of the Islamic world, and some scholars have, at least in theory, supported an understanding derived more directly from the text of the Qur'an itself, understood to be the very word of God, where it says: "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256). This is understood to mean that an individual cannot be forced to accept Islam as his or her religion. By wider implication, some argue, it can be taken to mean that someone who decides to leave Islam cannot be forced to return. This understanding contrasts with the hard-line Islamist understanding, derived from other Qur'anic verses (9:12; 29; 36; 123): "Fight the unbelievers" is the message of all these verses. The term "unbelievers" is popularly and among hard-liners understood to mean all non-Muslims. Moderate and modernist scholars, however, will say that these verses apply only to certain specific cases where non-Muslims have taken the initiative in aggression towards Muslims. According to this view, none of these verses can be understood as a general order to fight non-Muslims. Likewise, according to the moderates and

the modernists, the term *ridda*, or apostasy, should not be understood in terms of inner religious conviction, but rather in terms of political and military treason.

Indeed, during the last fifty years or so, few examples of death sentences for apostasy from Islam have been documented. The applications of the old laws concerning *Dhimmis* have likewise lapsed. Only in Yemen did these laws continue to be in force until the departure of practically all the Yemeni Jews in 1950. Christian missionary work in the Islamic world including attempts at proselytism among Muslims has been conducted on a considerable scale since the 19th century and through the height of colonial rule, but has met increasing restrictions since such rule ended during the 1940s and 1950s.

Legislation on the issue of apostasy has, in general, been unclear. In Egypt, for instance, there is no law saying that it is forbidden to change one's religion, but a convert from Islam to Christianity risks being arrested and imprisoned when his or her conversion becomes known. By law, a person who wishes to convert to another religion (only Islam, Christianity and Judaism are considered legal religions) must meet with a person of religious authority in the community, a priest, a rabbi or an imam, who must make sure that the conversion is not forced and should even try to persuade the person who wants to convert to give up the conversion and stay in his or her own original community. However, this law is not always applied, and Christians are encouraged in various ways to adopt Islam. A Christian can change his or her name officially to a Muslim name and easily obtain a new identity card, whereas it is legally impossible for a Muslim who has become a Christian to change his or her name officially. In some other countries in the Islamic world there are clear laws against apostasy, which carries the death penalty.

Wherever *Sharia* is adopted as the basis of national or regional law, or even where adherence to *Sharia* is the expected norm in a sub-culture, the whole idea of religious freedom as described in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is problematic, to say the least. *Sharia* as traditionally understood runs counter to the ideas expressed in Article 18. There are countries traditionally belonging to the Muslim world, however, where a long history of religious tolerance has made it easier to accept the ideas of Article 18, even among Muslims. The best example is Indonesia, but even in Indonesia the legislative process is at present strongly influenced by a conservative Islamist agenda.

In the post-Soviet societies which were historically part of the Muslim world, the very idea that a Muslim could be free to choose his or her religion is often viewed with suspicion, if not outright condemnation. Apostasy from Islam is tantamount to treason, even from the point of view of Muslims who are Muslims by culture rather than by faith and spiritual conviction.

Here as in the Middle East Muslim opinion is, of course, informed not only by religious texts, but also by a long history of perceived victimization at the hands of crusaders, be they Franks or Russians. Conversion to Christianity is seen as joining the enemy.

All this being said, there is reason for concern because we are all living in a world characterized by massive change, including a shift from old community-based concepts of rights and duties to more individualistic ones. This change comes as a result of the influences of globalization made possible by the advances of the means of mass-communication. Even in

conservative, tribally oriented societies like those of the Arabian Peninsula, young adults will be influenced by what they hear and see from East and West, North and South, by satellite TV and on the Internet, and a civilizational clash seems inevitable. The reason for this clash is that, in general, Islamic law is still being applied in ways that do not take deeper layers of societal change into consideration, and by people who see no way of changing the “letter of the law” to suit those changes.

Dr. Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, an Egyptian history professor, was condemned as an apostate by an Egyptian court in 1995 for having proposed changes to Islamic inheritance laws clearly defined in the Qur’an. Dr. Abu Zaid’s argument was based on the fact that the Qur’anic text as such was a great step forward for women’s rights, whereby instead of having no right to inherit from their deceased fathers, they were given the right of half of what their brothers inherited. By consequence, women—whose place in society has changed in such a way that they are, in actual fact, breadwinners on equal terms with their husbands—should now be given the right to inheritance on equal terms with men, who were formerly supposed to be the breadwinners and therefore would inherit a double portion of what each of their sisters would inherit.

When a professing Muslim can be condemned thus as an apostate, one wonders how the attitude to a Muslim who apostatizes in favor of Christianity—not to speak of other religions—can change. Seeing groups of Egyptian youths in the streets of Cairo chanting Hare Krishna ritual chants is still unthinkable. Jehovah’s Witnesses are outlawed in all Arab countries and most of the Muslim world. Only the three traditional monotheistic religions are allowed to exist officially. Foreign non-affiliated churches or churches which have not previously existed in Egypt can only set up missions there if they are accepted by one of the country’s existing denominations. For instance, a mission of a Pentecostal denomination at odds with Assemblies of God in the United States must register with the Assemblies of God counterpart in Egypt in order to exist.

In my examples, I have focused almost exclusively on Egypt, but similar conditions obtain elsewhere in the Middle East. In the Arabian Peninsula, conditions are generally worse, especially in Saudi Arabia, where government representatives have repeatedly stated that Christian churches or buildings of any other faith community except Islam will never be built anywhere in the country. Christian worship in private houses is said by one government minister to be admissible, but the fanatic religious police “Muttawa’” seem to interpret this differently. They have interrupted Christian prayer meetings in private homes and arrested the participants. This practice is “justified” by a saying by the Prophet that Islam cannot co-exist in the Arabian Peninsula with any other religion.

As most of the countries in the Muslim world in theory claim to defend human rights, including religious freedom, even claiming that Islam was the first religion to codify human rights, it is obvious that their understanding of religious freedom differs greatly from the general western understanding. The “religious supermarket” with a free choice of different products and brands has not been introduced in that part of the world yet, and governments are not interested in introducing it, probably partly because of a fear of anything that threatens stability and predictability.

Governments also feel a great need to paternalistically protect their citizens, especially the illiterate or those with little education, from new ideas that do not belong in the religion that they have “inherited” from their parents. The main reason, however, is that Islam is seen as the ultimate truth, and its prophet Muhammad is “the seal of the prophets,” meaning the last one who brought the final and perfect revelation for all mankind. Governments in the Islamic world see themselves as defenders of the true faith, and the Islamists who accuse them of not doing enough to fulfill that role stand ready to take that role upon themselves.

Regrettably, much remains to be done in the realm of religious liberty in the Muslim world. If governments and their agencies could be persuaded to pay international conventions more than mere lip service, much could be gained, especially if their educational systems would instill respect for human rights into their students. Especially respect for the individual’s personal convictions needs to be promoted, together with respect for those religious traditions which belong to the cultural and national heritage of the countries of the Muslim world.

At the same time, it must be underscored that there are signs of hope, especially since intellectuals and religious officials in the Muslim world are discussing these subjects openly and are suggesting reforms which could lead to greater religious liberty.

The Biblical Basis for Persecution

It is noteworthy that at the end of Genesis 1 and 2, we find God announcing that creation is “good.” Yet, in the very first verse of chapter 3, we find something that apparently is not good:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’”

Two initial observations are noteworthy:

1. From the nature of the question it is obvious that the serpent (Satan) is already in rebellion against God.
2. The fact that Satan can be in rebellion, and creation is still considered “good” by God tells us that Satan is not responsible for our world being what it is today. Satan is not the one to blame for the world being “not good.”

These observations become clear in the verses that follow:

And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of

the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Genesis 3:2–7)

The relationship between God and His image bearers has been broken, as the reflection seeks to supplant the Reality. Rather than enjoying the unique relationship with their Creator and the unrestricted access to God that they had known and been privileged to, they now hide. Religious freedom in the Edenic experience is no longer truly possible. Yet, God still seeks out those whom He created to have fellowship with.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Genesis 3:8–11)

Exposed and challenged with the reality of their disobedience, both Adam and Eve look for someone to blame.

The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:12,13)

The man blamed the woman and, indirectly, God (“*the woman whom you gave to be with me*”). The woman blamed the snake. And, as one of my seminary professors liked to say whenever he referred to this passage, the snake didn’t have a leg to stand on. In reality, Satan had beguiled the woman, the woman had listened to the serpent, and the man had listened to the woman—but no one had listened to God.¹⁶ As a result, God issues a prophetic word of judgment and deliverance to the serpent (verses 14,15), the woman (verse 16), and the man (verses 17–19).¹⁷

To the serpent the Lord says:

*“Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock*

*and above all beasts of the field;
 on your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.
 I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and her offspring;
 he shall bruise your head,
 and you shall bruise his heel.”* (Genesis 3:14,15)

Notice that God does not say that nature is cursed because of the serpent, but that he will be *more* cursed than the rest of nature. He is condemned to humiliation and ultimate defeat under the victorious offspring of the woman. Satan’s judgment, accomplished through human instrumentality, will bring deliverance to the offspring of the woman, but in a process of bruising and pain. The deliverance will come through the crushing of the serpent’s head, but in the process the heel that crushes him will be bruised. This motif of deliverance in the process of pain is repeated in the words that follow to the woman and her husband.

Next, God addresses the one who was deceived by the serpent:

*To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
 in pain you shall bring forth children.
 Your desire shall be for your husband,
 and he shall rule over you.”* (Genesis 3:16)

The nature of the woman’s curse is rooted in the nature of her sin. As Raymond Ortlund notes, the woman’s curse is twofold. First, as a mother, she will suffer in relation to her children.

She will still be able to bear children. This is God’s mercy providing the means by which He will carry out His death sentence on the serpent. But now the woman will suffer in childbirth. This is God’s severity for her sin. The new element in her experience, then, is not childbirth but the pain of childbirth.¹⁸

Second, as a wife, she will suffer in relation to her husband. Ortlund comments, “The exact content of her marital suffering could be defined in either of two ways. Either she will suffer conflict with her husband, or she will suffer domination by him.”¹⁹ There are two factors that lead me to conclude that the former interpretation is to be preferred. First, in the following chapter, there is a passage (4:7) that is virtually identical to that in 3:16. In 4:7, Cain is told that sin has a desire for him, but he must master it. Sin’s desire was to control Cain and have its way with him. Virtually identical phraseology is found in 3:16 and helps to explain the woman’s

“desire” for her husband. God tells the woman that the relationship between her and her husband will be one of conflict and control. God gives her up to a desire to control him, to have her way with him, to exercise spiritual leadership (just as she had done during the serpent’s temptation), but her husband must not allow this to happen. He must assume his role as the head. This interpretation most closely follows the reasoning in 4:7.²⁰ The second reason I favor this interpretation is that it mirrors the curse of the serpent in that it defines the curse, followed by a statement of hope. The hope of the strained relationship between the woman and her husband is not in the competition that is a result of the Fall but in the restoration of the relationship that they had prior to it. This was a relationship where the man was the spiritual head and the wife functioning as helpmate and partner.

Speaking to the man, God says,

*“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”* (Genesis 3:17–19)

It is in these verses that we finally understand why creation is no longer “good.” Having been given stewardship over the world, Adam will now find his work painful. Just as childbirth was not the woman’s curse, neither is work to be seen as man’s curse. Work is part of what it means to be created in the image of God. But now, because of the Fall, man’s work will be painful and temporal. He will spend his entire life working the soil, only to return to it at the end.

This is not the way he was created to function. Failure and pain are not due to one being “human” but because one is “fallen.” The fault is not with creation, God, or even with Satan. The culprit responsible for this world’s condition is man, created in the image of God, deciding that being an image bearer was insufficient. The image of God sought equality with God.

But man is not without hope. In verse 22, God casts him out of the garden as an act of grace “lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” Because of the Fall, immortality would be unbearable as sin would multiply out of control in the life of the individual and throughout society. Death is, hence, an act of grace, controlling the depth and scope of depravity.

But man’s “deadness” is not merely physical. He is dead spiritually and this requires God’s intervention—crushing of the serpent’s head, whereby restoration to fellowship with God and spiritual “aliveness” is enabled. This is what was promised to the woman.

And Adam remembers this promise contained in God’s words concerning the woman of the offspring who would bruise the serpent’s head. So we read in verse 20:

The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

Adam, in his role as spiritual head, gives the woman the name “Eve” (חַוְוָה, hawwah) from which “life” (חַיָּה, hay) will come. The play on words is significant and deliberate. There is hope in the offspring of the woman. Just as Adam came from “adamah” (Hebrew for “earth”), so life (hay) will come from Eve (hawwah). Ortlund notes:

By these dreadful, and yet hopeful, oracles of destiny (3:14–19), God shapes for us the existence we all share today. Under these conditions, our pain alerts us to a great truth: This life is not our fulfillment. This life is not meant to be a final experience. Our pain and limitations point us to God, to the eternal, to the transcendent, where our true fulfillment lies.

Adam understood this truth, I think. Instead of turning away from the bar of God’s justice in bitterness and despair, Adam turns to his wife and says, “I believe God’s promise. He has not cast us adrift completely. He will give us the final victory over our enemy and we will again enjoy the richness and fullness of life in God. And because you are the mother of all those who will truly live, I give you a new name—Eve, Living One. I believe God, and I honor you.” In contrast to the cruel, cutting words of verse 12, Adam reaches out in love to Eve and they are reunited in faith and hope.²¹

Note, however, that the solution to man’s suffering because of sin will come *through* suffering. The heel will be struck. In the process of crushing the serpent, the heel of the woman’s offspring will be bruised. The setting is that of conflict between the serpent and the woman, which is echoed in Revelation 12. It is in Genesis 3 that

we see the basis for the coming persecution of God's people. The price of reconciling creation to its Creator will take place in a context of suffering and conflict.

Following the creation of man and the giving of man's divine mandate to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth and exercise dominion as His image bearer (1:22,26,28), God declares that His work of creation is finished (*šābat*) (2:3). In His work of restoring creation to this condition of perfection, God will make two other proclamations of His work being "finished."²² The second time is on the cross when redemption promised becomes redemption accomplished (John 19:30). The third is in Revelation 21:6 when God's work is once and for all finished. Not only will the punishment and penalty of sin be accomplished but also the very presence of sin will be removed and full restoration will be achieved. But God's plan of restoration did not begin at the Fall, as though it were unexpected. From the very beginning, God designed a plan to restore His creation to the place where it can again be declared "good."

It is obvious from the biblical record that God created man knowing he would rebel and that He had drawn up careful plans to deal with the consequences. This foreknowledge does not make God responsible for the Fall, in as much as He gave man genuine freedom from creation to freely choose or to freely reject His love. Being created in the image of God, man was capable of genuine independent choice and, like God, capable of real love.²³ Absolute free will is a prerequisite of true love. Forced or predetermined love is no love at all. In His creation of man, God had to allow for the possibility (indeed, the inevitability) that His love would be rejected, in order that those who would respond to His grace would do so genuinely. As the early church fathers understood, force is no attribute of God.²⁴ To create mankind in His image but deny them the freedom not to love and trust Him would have been a violation of His own character. God created a world knowing that His representatives would reject Him, subjecting His creation to ruin. Yet, He chose to do so to the end that His glory and character might be perfectly seen in the restoration and enjoyed by those who submitted to His grace in their lives. Knowing this, He sets His plan in motion, as the Scriptures say, from the foundation of the world, doing everything possible to bring restoration and completeness back to His creation.

But the path to this full restoration will be of conflict, pain, and bruising, as foretold in Genesis 3:15. It does not take long for this conflict to be manifested.

Cain and Abel

It is interesting to note that the first case of persecution in the Bible begins in a place of worship. In the first recorded time of formal worship before the Lord, in Genesis 4, we find the sons of Adam and Eve bringing offerings to the Lord:

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. (Genesis 4:2b,5)

We are not told exactly why Cain's offering was unacceptable to God, while Abel's pleased him. It is likely that Cain brought simply some samples of his harvest, whereas Abel made certain that what he brought was only the best. Thus Abel gave out of faith and thankfulness, whereas Cain gave only out of duty.

Likewise, we are not told how God expressed His displeasure with Cain's offering, but it was obviously done in such a manner that Cain understood and was angry that God should respond that way to his sacrifice. The Lord refuses to ignore Cain's response and, in grace, calls him to repentance.

The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted and if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." (Genesis 4:6,7)

That Cain does not heed God's call to rule over his anger and instead allows it to master him is evident. Cain refuses to bow the knee before God and he decides to rid himself of his religious opponent, even if it is his own brother. At this point we witness the first incident of religious persecution:

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. (Genesis 4:8)

It is obvious that the New Testament views Abel's death as much more than the result of sibling rivalry or a family squabble that got out of control. Jesus clearly saw Abel's death as an act of martyrdom (Matthew 23:35), as does the apostle John (1 John 3:12). John explains that Abel's death was because Cain's acts were evil and Abel's were righteous. Abel's death is clearly set in a context of martyrdom, a result of the conflict between the world and those who belong to God (1 John 3:13).

I wonder if it was this incident that Jesus was thinking about when He said,

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth.

I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.” (Matthew 10:34–36)

Not only did persecution begin because of religious intolerance, but it also took place in the home. Just as it divided the first family, loyalty to God often cuts families asunder. Let us not be surprised when in today's world we hear of, for example, young girls in Pakistan and India being shot to death by their relatives when they convert to Christ. I have met young teenagers in Ethiopia being driven from their homes into the streets to beg when they become believers. We are heartbroken when we discover that girls who have come to Christ in Muslim societies are sometimes forced by their fathers to marry Muslim men to guarantee that her children will be Muslims. As we witness these travesties, we realize that these are stark demonstrations of the cruel reality of the conflict between the seed of the woman and the serpent. Families, as important as they are for our nurture and security, can also be places of terrible violence.

The Lord's response to Abel's murder is instructive to us. He says that the voice of Abel's blood "*is crying to me from the ground*" (4:10). The word used here for "crying" is q[ʕ] (sā'aq) and is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe the outcry of the individual or group who are suffering injustice and require intervention of their behalf.²⁵ It often refers to God hearing the outcries of the oppressed because they have been denied justice and are unable to defend themselves from unlawful oppression and exploitation.²⁶ On the use of the word in Genesis 18:20, Gerhard von Rad comments that the word is a technical legal term and designates the cry for help which one who suffers a great injustice screams.²⁷

We even know what the cry was, namely, "Foul play!" (*hāmās*, Jer. 20:8; Hab. 1:2; Job 19:7). With this cry for help (which corresponds to the old German "*Zeterruf*"), he appeals for the protection of the legal community. What it does not hear or grant, however, comes directly before Yahweh as the guardian of all right (cf. ch. 4:10). Yahweh, therefore, is not concerned with punishing Sodom but rather with an investigation of the case, which is serious, to be sure. The proceeding is hereby opened...²⁸

God's justice requires that He punish Cain for the murder of his brother. In sentencing him, however, God does not condemn Cain to being a disdained outcast, liable to vigilante justice. This is what Cain fears (4:14). God, in His mercy, places a mark on Cain to protect him too from being wrongfully killed (Genesis 4:8–17).

Cain had complained that he would be hidden from God's presence or face and terrified that he would be denied God's judicial protection. The imagery of God hiding His presence or face is a common one in Scripture, meaning to refuse to notice something and thus avoid responding to it.²⁹ The Lord's response is evidence that, even as a murderer, Cain is not beyond God's mercy and protection.³⁰ Cain's life,

like Abel's and all humans', belongs to God and He will not abandon it. The right to life is protected by God, even for those who do not deserve it.

Noah

Following the story of Cain, Noah becomes the next major character in the Old Testament narrative to whom considerable attention is drawn. The focus of our discussion, however, is not on Noah as the instrument of God's preservation of His creation, but on the instructions that God gives him regarding the preservation of human life in 9:5,6. From each man, God says, He will "require a reckoning for the life of man" (9:5b). However, unlike the situation with Cain and Abel when God appeared directly as a judge, this accounting was no longer solely God's exclusive responsibility. It is now shared with human beings.³¹ This is reiterated in verse 6:

*"Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed,
for God made man in his own image."* (emphasis added)

In this passage, God announces that mankind has been delegated the responsibility of being God's instruments of justice and upholders of basic human rights such as the right to life. They are not called upon to wait for divine retribution or intervention. This does not justify the use of vigilante justice, as the rest of Scripture makes clear. The responsibility for exercising this God-given instrumentality is placed in the hands of civil authorities who are given rights that individuals do not possess. But the responsibility to uphold and support the rights of one's fellow image bearers is a divine mandate. Those who cry out for justice should not be met with a wall of indifferent silence from those who claim to be fellow image bearers and especially not from those who are being renewed into the full image of God through the work of Jesus Christ.

Lot

Lot, we read in 2 Peter 2:7, was a "*righteous man who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men*" who tried to break down the door of his house in Sodom when he welcomed messengers from God into his home (Genesis 19:9).

While by no means the best example of righteousness, Peter sees Lot's deliverance from Sodom as deliverance from persecution:

If he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)—if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials. (2 Peter 2:7–9)

One lesson to be drawn from Lot's example is that persecution is not restricted to only mature believers or spiritual giants. All who claim to follow God will undoubtedly be, at some point, called upon to make a stand. In Lot's case, while much of his life was characterized by compromise, to his credit, he did rise to the challenge when called upon.

Abraham

If one were to identify an individual in the biblical record who could be called the "father of faith," the person most likely to be named would be Abraham. Called out of a pagan background, he is told to pack up, leave his home, and go to a land that God would show him. He is promised that God would make him into a great nation and a source of blessing for the entire world.

As God unfolds His plan for restoring the world to its original created state, Abraham plays a pivotal role (Genesis 12:1–4; 15:5,6).

But the path of faith to which he is called is not an easy one. For his entire life, he lives in a tent as a nomad. Hebrews 11, when referring to Abraham, puts it in this perspective: *"By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God"* (Hebrews 11:9,10).

God promises him a son and then waits nearly Abraham's whole life before fulfilling it. Indeed, God waits until it's almost too late, and Abraham despairs.

Then, after God fulfills His promise, He makes the shocking declaration that Abraham is to take his son up to a mountain and kill him. Can you imagine the anguish that Abraham must have felt? The confusion? Yes, even the doubts?

But Abraham obeys. And at the very last moment, God intervenes and provides a substitute in the form of a ram. Then once again, He restates His original promise that Abraham would be the source of blessings for all nations because of his obedience (Genesis 22:15–18).

Abraham's faithful obedience was not a painless one. It was a path marked with disappointments, pain, and tears. It was a path that does not see the complete fulfillment of God's promises in his lifetime. Instead as Hebrews 11:16 says, *"they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."*

God's plan to reconcile the world to Himself involved calling a man away from home, familiarity, and comfort, taking him into exile into the wilderness to a strange land and into suffering and promise. From Abraham's life we glean the valuable lesson that true faith inevitably suffers, sacrifices, and hopes.

Isaac

Isaac continues Abraham's legacy. As he tries to make a home in the land that God has promised him, he suffers from the envy of the Philistines and others where he lives because of the evident blessing of God on his life. They fill or confiscate his wells, causing him to move on to other areas to water his herds. Finally, as his enemies witness God's continued blessing on his life and his refusal to retaliate, they make peace with him, leading to the end of persecution (Genesis 26:12–33). But Isaac demonstrates that experiencing God's blessing may result in significant opposition and hardship. The call is to respond graciously, voluntarily depriving oneself in order to maintain one's integrity and witness before others.

Egypt's Oppression of Israel

Israel is described in Scripture as being “oppressed” by Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Exodus 1:11,12). They suffer not because of individual or corporate sin, but simply because of who they are as a people. The Lord declares that He is concerned about their suffering and desires to free them from the oppression of the Egyptians (Exodus 3:7–10). His desire and concern are concretely expressed as he raises up a deliverer in the very household of their oppressors.

In Exodus 2:15 Moses kills a guard who had been beating a fellow Israelite and consequently is forced to flee into exile when Pharaoh seeks his life in return. The author of Hebrews provides a commentary on what had led up to this action. Moses, he says, was faced with a difficult choice. He could remain in the palace and enjoy the “passing pleasures of sin,” or he could relinquish the palace and choose to be “mistreated along with the people of God” (11:24–26).

We know from the story recorded in Exodus that he chose the latter and dedicated his life to the liberation of his people from slavery and to the establishment of a people who would serve God. This choice involved Moses in a lifetime of hardship, toil, tears, and threats.³² He faced opposition from both within the household of faith and without—from Egyptian oppressors and from those he was sent to deliver. The author of Hebrews refers to Moses' actions as reproach “for the sake of Christ” as he looked ahead to a greater reward than that which he could have enjoyed as Egyptian royalty (11:26). Sacrificing for the purposes of God is a Christlike kind of reproach.

In the wilderness wanderings, it is not only Moses who suffers. In Deuteronomy 30:7, the Lord refers to those who harass Israel as being those who “persecute them.”

Blessing and Cursing in Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy is the renewal of the original covenant that God made with the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai. The forty years of wandering in the wilder-

ness was virtually over and Israel was poised at the edge of the Promised Land, ready this time to obey and take the land that God had promised them. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses set before Israel the blessings and cursings of the covenant that they are renewing.

God began by issuing a series of blessings (verses 1–14) and then a series of cursings (verses 15–68). The blessings are heavily outnumbered by the cursings and each is conditioned by Israel's obedience (verses 1,15). If they obey, they can expect blessing in every area of their life. If they disobey, they can expect troubles in every area of their life. This is, in a capsule, the basic Deuteronomic theology.³³ However, this is an oversimplification of reality and God's entire revelation, as demonstrated by the prophet Habakkuk and Job, both of whom ask questions that challenge this type of reading of Deuteronomy. Habakkuk asks God, "*Why do you idly look at traitors and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?*" (Habakkuk 1:13), while Job suffers because he "*was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil*" (Job 1:1,8).

Some scholars even hold that Job was specifically written to challenge a simplistic interpretation of Deuteronomic theology.³⁴ A close reading of Deuteronomy itself reveals the folly of interpreting the blessings and cursings in terms of moral behavior alone. In 8:2,3, Moses reminds Israel that God humbled them in the wilderness not because of any specific sin but in order to teach and test them. In 8:18, God is said to give Israel the power to attain wealth. Hence, their wealth is a gift from Him, not strictly earned through their obedience and lost through their disobedience. In 9:4–6, God declares that He is not giving the blessing of the land to Israel because of their righteousness. Indeed, the fact that they are being given the land is seen as an expression of grace, as they are a stubborn people (9:6) and because of the promise that He made with "*your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob*" (9:5). The only reason they were spared God's wrath at all was because of Moses' intervention on their behalf (9:25–29).

It is obvious from the rest of the Old Testament that the blessings and cursings were not accepted uncritically as absolute promises. We must temper the teachings of this book with all of Scripture.³⁵ The historical books themselves present a mixed picture. In war, the sword devours one as well as the other (2 Samuel 11:25), the innocent suffers alongside the guilty. In 1 Samuel 22:18,19, the totally innocent priests of Nob are slaughtered for doing what is right. One need only look at the opulent lives of the wicked kings in the history of Israel as they defied the law of God. It becomes readily apparent that evil is not always punished in this life, nor is righteousness always blessed. This is amply illustrated by the persecution faced by the prophets and the "suffering servant" of God in Isaiah 53.

Therefore, to the question of whether all good things and all bad things are the result of God's response to man's actions, five conclusions may be drawn:

1. Every good gift comes from God.
2. Many blessings and curses are a result of man's response to God.
3. Some blessings and curses are a result of God's plans for man.
4. Blessings can become curses if we fail to glorify God.
5. The teaching "whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7) is a general principle that will be true in the long run, but there will be times when it seems to be fallacy (especially in the short term).³⁶

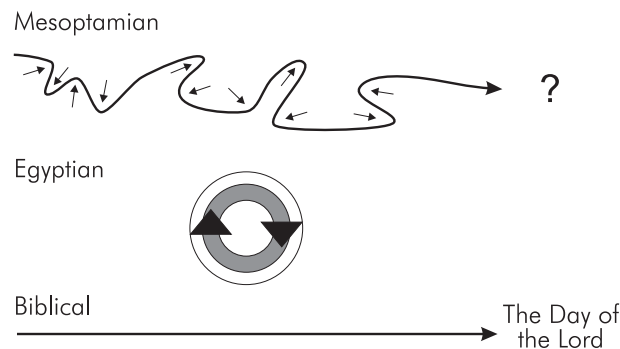
THE EXAMPLE OF HISTORY: INSIGHTS FROM THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

The Old Testament View of History

The study of how history was viewed by the peoples of the ancient world is a fascinating one. While space does not permit us the luxury of a thorough investigation, it is accurate to say the Jews were unique in their view that history was going somewhere.

E. A. Speiser makes the keen observation that the Bible is not so much a chronicle of events and thoughts worth recording as it is an *interpretation* of significant happenings. The Bible is thus "essentially a philosophy of history."³⁷ The way that Israel viewed history was startling, particularly in comparison to the two dominant cultures with which it interacted: Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The following illustration introduces the Mesopotamian, the Egyptian, and the biblical views of history. An explanation will follow.



The Mesopotamian cultures³⁸ saw history as a chaotic meandering, subject to the whims of capricious, untrustworthy gods who might turn on them at any moment. No one, not even the gods, knew where history was going. No one god was the ultimate source of power and authority. Indeed, none were truly omnipotent.³⁹ Nothing in the universe was therefore permanent and absolute; nothing could be taken for granted. History was dynamic but unpredictable. The only hope of averting disaster or misfortune was by seeking to propitiate the gods somehow. Perhaps, it was hoped, some sort of favorable decision might be rendered on behalf of the one making the offering. Since the gods were capricious, this was never a certain thing. It was important, therefore, to find out what had apparently “worked” in the past. If it could be shown that a certain offering or ritual had proved effective before, this provided a possible key to pleasing their deities in the present.

The past then became very important as a check against the reoccurrence of past disasters.⁴⁰ The past, it was hoped, might provide keys to knowing how to propitiate the gods. There was, therefore, a need for constant watchfulness and an increasingly elaborate ritual. Speiser observes: “The cosmos, in short, lacked a true basis for an ethical approach to life. Form rather than content promised the best protection against the whims of heaven.”⁴¹

The ziggurats are a prime example of the hopes of the Mesopotamians to forge a link between heaven and earth, between immortals and mortals in their pursuit of survival. The ziggurats also reflect the other tenet of the Mesopotamian worldview: the belief that human society was an exact replica of the society of the gods with the ziggurats serving a link between the two. Just as no god could claim absolute divine authority, it was impossible for any human ruler to claim such rights. The concept of a divine ruler was foreign to Mesopotamian thought.⁴² The authority of the king was thus doubly restricted. As Speiser points out:

On the one hand, his mandate stemmed from the gods, to whom he was accountable for his every action. And on the other hand, the king was subject to the will of the assembly of his elders, just as the head of the pantheon was bound by the wishes of his celestial assembly.

These twin checks on the power of the mortal ruler—one cosmic and the other societal—had a direct effect on the Mesopotamian concept of state. In these circumstances, the state could evolve into nothing but a kind of democracy. For government by assembly and the circumscribed authority of the king could scarcely add up to anything else. The main beneficiary was the individual, whose rights were protected by the law—more specifically the cosmic, unalterable, and impersonal law called *kittum*, as approximate synonym of Hebrew *'emeth*. The ruler was ever the humble servant of the *kittum*, never its master. The presence of

writing was a further safeguard against abuses or distortions on the part of the king.⁴³

These laws, which protected the rights of the individual, can be found in the vast numbers of documents that have been found in Mesopotamian archeological digs. While this dynamic view of history resulted in societies run, for the most part, by the rule of law, the lack of an absolute authority made it impossible to determine whether the laws were ultimately right or moral. No values were ultimately enduring.⁴⁴ The collapse of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires was due not so much to the superiority of their enemies as it was to the crushing weight of their internal structure while they sought to find form and security within the chaos of their worldview. The Mesopotamians were an expansionist, progressive people who, because of their worldview, had to keep looking over their shoulder in fear. Lacking absolute standards, they sought security in form and ritual that increasingly became too taxing to maintain. Trying to find a way to live securely in a chaotic universe, tragically, led eventually to their collapse.

The Egyptians, on the other hand, held to a static view of history. The cosmos of the Egyptians was the outcome of a single creative process, unlike the progression of events in the Mesopotamian (and biblical) creation story. There was no *kit-tum* concept among the Egyptians either. In its place was a personal absolute law in the person of the Pharaoh, the incarnation of the creator. The king was a god whose world was as stable and unchanging as the rhythm of the Nile and the constant shining of the sun.⁴⁵ History was wrapped in the reign of the divine king. There was no codification of law as in Mesopotamia. The word of the Pharaoh became law as soon as the words were spoken. In the Pharaoh there was stability and order. As G. Herbert Livingston points out:

When the Pharaoh was crowned, he did not become a god; he was simply unveiled as a god. In the cult, the Pharaoh was high priest; in the government, his rule was the absolute; in war, he was the army; in art, he symbolized Egypt. The Pharaoh could delegate his power to others, and at times his underlings may have seemed more powerful than he; but his power was repeatedly reemphasized. There is no clear evidence that a real revolt of the people was ever mounted against him. Even invaders were absorbed into the concept of the Pharaoh's supremacy and ejected as soon as possible.⁴⁶

Since the kingship was supremely important, the Egyptians gave very little heed in their records to events not directly related to the throne.⁴⁷ The records make no reference to the predecessors of the Pharaoh or to his successors; history is the reign of the Pharaoh. The calendar begins with his coming to the throne and ends with

his death. The linear concept of time with a continuous era was completely foreign to the Egyptian worldview. H. Frankfort notes:

The Egyptians had very little sense of history or of past and future. For they conceived their world as essentially static and unchanging. It had gone forth complete from the hands of the Creator. Historical incidents were, consequently, no more than superficial disturbances of the established order, or recurring events of never-changing significance. The past and the future—far from being a matter of concern—were wholly implicit in the present . . . The divinity of animals and kings, the pyramids, mummifications—as well as several other and seemingly unrelated features of Egyptian civilization—its moral maxims, the forms peculiar to poetry and prose—can all be understood as a result of a basic conviction that only the changeless is truly significant.⁴⁸

To reconstruct a history of Egypt is notoriously difficult. Often private and business documents prove to be more reliable than royal ones. Records from western Asia that date from the same period—diplomatic treaties, trade, wars and other contacts with Egypt by other civilizations—often prove more enlightening than actual Egyptian documentation.

It is difficult to conceive how two cultures could have existed in such close proximity to each other, with frequent interaction between the two over thousands of years, yet be so fundamentally different socially and religiously.

With Israel in close relationship both historically and geographically, does the Bible reflect a similarity with either the Mesopotamian or Egyptian view of history? The answer is both yes and no.

Speiser argues:

It is abundantly clear today that, of the two major centres of civilization in the area, it was the distant Mesopotamia and not neighboring Egypt that left the deeper cultural impression upon Israel. This was to be expected. For in the first place, the patriarchs had their roots in the land across the Euphrates and in the second place, the Egyptian way was static and isolationist, whereas the Mesopotamian was dynamic and expansive—naturally suited to reach out to other lands, Israel included . . .

The independent evidence of the law, moreover, serves to emphasize the fact that in the wide area of cultural correspondence between Mesopotamia and Israel, we are likely to be confronted with cases of actual kinship as opposed to mere coincidence. In both societies the law was impersonal and supreme; the king was its servant and not its source and master. Furthermore, the respective legal disciplines are closely linked in spirit and in content, notwithstanding

numerous differences in details. And because many of the features that are common to both lands can now be traced back to the very beginning of Mesopotamian civilization, Israel has to be regarded in this respect as the cultural descendant of Mesopotamia.⁴⁹

Despite their similarities, however, there are profound differences in the Mesopotamian and Israelite views of history. For example, I would disagree with Speiser that the law in Israel's case was impersonal. This is a critical area of difference. Israel's law was from a personal, covenant-making God whose character and will was reflected in the law. This is far cry from the Mesopotamian *kittum*. Because of the covenant, Israel saw history as being under the control of a single, omnipotent Master who created all things, sustains all things, and controls the course of history. History was seen as purposeful, not liable to the whims of capricious deities as in the Mesopotamian view, or the totalitarian authority of rulers with divine pretensions, as in the Egyptian view. From the biblical point of view, man is bestowed with responsibility, dignity, and hope.⁵⁰ In a very real sense, the biblical view is a direct rejection of both the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian views of history.⁵¹ History does matter (contra Egypt) but it is not out of control (contra Mesopotamia). Hence the believer has both hope and security as we see history moving toward a climax, which the biblical authors call the "Day of the Lord."

In later times, the Jews would encounter the view of the Greeks who tended to see history as moving forward and downward. The golden age was past, and time was marching toward death, darkness, and suffering. The Jews knew that the best was yet to come.

They looked ahead to a day when affliction and suffering would end and when justice would prevail. They knew that the present state of the world was abnormal. They recognized that this world is not all that there is. Hence, I believe they avoided the stagnation that inevitably caused the collapse of the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greek civilizations.

In their history, Israel saw the hand of God at work, moving them and the rest of the world toward a final goal. Suffering and affliction were part of that plan, most often depicted as a punishment for sins—a means by which God sought to restore His people to fellowship with Himself—or, on the other hand, as a means of developing and revealing spiritual maturity in the lives of His people.

Sometimes, however, suffering has a value in the mind of God that is known only to Him and is not necessarily to be understood as a means of punishment or discipline. In such cases, it is enough for the child of God to know that God watches over even the dark and obscure ways (see Psalm 23:4). As we saw in Genesis 3:14, God's plans for restoration require conflict, suffering, and bruising of His people. It

is true, as we shall see in the history of Israel, that sometimes God chose to use suffering to punish and restore the people to fellowship. Sometimes He used it for the spiritual training of His people. At other times, however, God's people suffer for reasons known only to Himself but which serve to effectively accomplish His purposes in history.⁵²

Gerstenberger and Schrage rightfully point out that there is no unitary meaning of suffering to be drawn from the Old Testament. Attempts to find such inevitably fail because the attempt itself exhibits an attitude of a lack of trust in God. The call to the sufferer is to entrust the distress to One who is mightier and who understands all things.⁵³

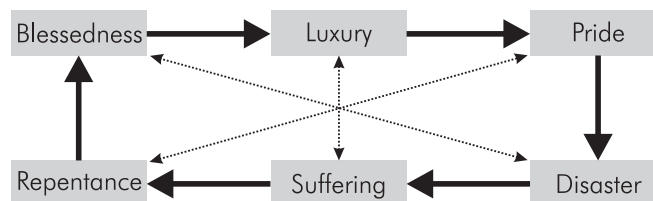
Suffering as Discipline

It is at this point that we need to pause and discuss the biblical theme of “discipline” because it is here that people often trip up. When we hear the word “discipline,” we tend to think primarily in the context of punishment.

Christians in Sudan, for example, often see their suffering as punishment from God for sin. They are not sure what that sin may be, but they often speak of their suffering in this context. To be sure, discipline does involve punishment, but this is not the whole picture. However, let us begin from the familiar and move to the unfamiliar.

Discipline as Punishment

Throughout Israel's history, as the people of God moved toward the Day of the Lord, the following cycle and contrasts emerged:⁵⁴



As God's people experienced His blessings, their lives typically became characterized by luxury and abundance. But as God warned them against (Deuteronomy 6:10–12), they soon forgot Him and took pride in what appeared to be their own achievements.

In loving discipline, we see in the historical books that God, in His desire to bring His people back into fellowship (or “blessedness”), He withdraws His favor

and blessing and brings disaster upon them in the form of famine, natural disaster, or enemy invaders.

The people suffer, in contrast to the luxury they knew when they were in fellowship with God. As they compare their present life with what they knew before, they are moved from pride to repentance. God then restores them to His covenant blessings. Tragically, this cycle was repeated throughout Israel's history.

Looking at their history, the Israelites understood that suffering could be the catalyst for their deliverance from sin and its consequences. Suffering could thereby result in God's glory. In Leviticus 26:18,24,28 especially, we see how God used suffering in the sense of corrective discipline for sin.

Thus, in the history of Israel, we see:

1. Sin and suffering are not permanent (history is going somewhere).
2. Suffering may be a fruit of continuing sin.
3. Suffering can be used by God to lead to repentance from sin and ultimately to the glory of God.

Viewing the suffering of God's people in this context alone is inconsistent with the full revelation of God.⁵⁵

Discipline as a Means to Spiritual Maturity

The concept that God's discipline can be a means to spiritual maturity is probably most clearly seen in the New Testament but it is not absent in the Old Testament.

In Deuteronomy 8, the suffering of the people in the wilderness is referred to as "discipline" to discover what was in the heart of the people (8:2). By this they were to learn that man does not live by bread alone but by everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord (8:3). In this, they were to know that God was disciplining them as a father disciplines his son (8:5).

Elsewhere in the Old Testament we see this same imagery of God training, correcting, instructing, and providing for His children as a Father. Discipline gives the assurance of sonship, seeking to create in the life of the child a God-centered way of life that reflects itself in obedience and ethical behavior.

In Psalm 94:12–14, it is God's discipline through the teaching of His Word that is evidence that the Lord has not forsaken His people:

Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law, to give him rest from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage.

Suffering Specifically for God's Sake

The Old Testament historical books also record incidents of what we most commonly understand as persecution: suffering for doing what is good, or more specifically, because of one's allegiance to the living God. We have already referred to the killing of Abel by Cain and the suffering of the Patriarchs in this context. Throughout the Old Testament, we find a number of other such examples:

- Moses is threatened with stoning by the people when they run out of water (Exodus 17:1–7).
- David is described as a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). Yet we read that Saul "was determined to put David to death" (1 Samuel 20:33; cf. 1 Samuel 18–27). David, however, is shielded by God (1 Samuel 18–27; Psalm 31:13; 59:1–4).
- Eighty-five priests of Nob are killed by Saul and Doeg (1 Samuel 22).
- Prophets are hunted and killed by Queen Jezebel. One hundred of them are hidden and fed by Obadiah, head of the king's household, in direct violation of his orders (1 Kings 18:3,4).⁵⁶
- Elijah is persecuted by Ahab and Jezebel, leading to his flight to the desert (1 Kings 18:10–19:2).
- Prophets (Elijah's colleagues) are killed by Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19:10,14).
- The prophet Micaiah is imprisoned by King Ahab, accused of troublemaking rather than prophesying in the name of the Lord (2 Chronicles 18:12–26).
- Elisha is threatened with death by the king (2 Kings 6:31).
- The prophet Hanani is imprisoned by King Asa (2 Chronicles 16:7–10).
- The prophet Zechariah is executed at King Joash's command (2 Chronicles 24:20–22).
- We are told that "Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another" (2 Kings 21:16).
- Jeremiah suffered at the hands of government officials (Jeremiah 15:15; 17:18; 20:11; 37:15,16; 38:4–6). False priests and prophets felt Jeremiah should die since he prophesied against them (Jeremiah 26:11).

- Uriah of Kiriath Jearim preaches the same message as Jeremiah and is pursued to Egypt by Jehoiakim's men, arrested, brought back to Jerusalem, and executed (Jeremiah 26:20–23).
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are cast in the fiery oven for refusing to bow to the image of the king, leading to their miraculous deliverance (Daniel 3).
- Daniel is thrown into the lion's den, leading to a miraculous deliverance by God (Daniel 6).
- In the book of Esther, the Persian King Ahasuerus persecuted the Jews. Mordecai was a special object of Haman's attacks (Esther 3:1–12; 5:14).
- Jesus, in Matthew 23:29–35, noted how Israel had typically rejected and persecuted every prophet that God had sent them.

POETS AND PHILOSOPHERS: INSIGHTS FROM THE WISDOM LITERATURE

Job

The book of Job is one of the most difficult, least understood books of the Bible. I would be lying if I pretended to understand the book completely. I do not. There are still a number of details in the text that I confess to having questions about. The treatment that I am able to give this book is necessarily cursory, due to space and subject constraints. What I am not in doubt about, however, is the conviction that Job contains a number of valuable lessons that we need to learn, and even a brief look at this fascinating book is of great benefit.

The setting for the book is laid out in the first two chapters in plain, didactic language. First, we are introduced to the main character, Job. We are informed from the beginning that he is blameless and upright (1:1). This is an important detail to uphold throughout our reading, as we shall see. Next, we are told about his family and his life situation. Job's life is described in idyllic terms—this is a man with everything going for him.

In 1:6, the scene shifts from earth to the courts of heaven. There we find Satan coming before God to tell God all the sinful things that people are doing on the earth (1:6,7). When the apostle John describes Satan in Revelation 12:10 as the accuser of our brothers, it is Job 1:6–11 and Zechariah 3:1 that he draws the description from. Satan, it appears, is given access to the presence of God, where he stands and tells Him that God's people really do not love or trust Him.

In response, God points to Job as an example of a man who defies Satan's accusations. Not content with that, however, Satan seeks to cast a cloud of suspicion on Job's character. He declares that Job loves and serves God for strictly selfish reasons. "Take away all that makes his life comfortable and safe," Satan sneers, "and Job will deny You."

Knowing Job's heart, God permits Satan to attempt to prove that his accusations are true, and it is in this context that we are to understand Job's suffering. Job is allowed to suffer because of his righteousness.

He loses all that he has: his wealth, his livelihood, his children, his home. He becomes diseased. He loses the respect of his wife. He is forced to live outside of the city in the garbage dump, an outcast from society. He is utterly destitute. Yet Job maintains his trust in and dependency on God (1:21,22; 2:3,10).

A few of Job's friends come by later to witness for themselves the disaster that has come upon their friend. They are stunned, and for seven days they sit with him in the garbage dump, without a word. While the text does not say so, their presence must have brought Job much comfort. Rejected by family, ridiculed by foes, their presence provided the touch of compassion that he must have desperately needed.

Sadly, they had to ruin it all by opening their mouths.

On a pastoral level, we may learn a valuable lesson here if we will heed it. When people are suffering, often the last thing they need is words of advice, even from friends and loved ones. They need our presence.⁵⁷ The compulsion to find meaning in suffering is sometimes less a need for the sufferer than for the one witnessing it. In the face of affliction and seeing a friend or loved one in need, we often feel an overwhelming obligation to bring a word of encouragement or to provide a possible solution to the situation at hand. While often well-intentioned, such words can, without our meaning to, even serve to intensify the distress and pain that the recipient is already experiencing.

This is what happened in Job's situation. After chapter 2, the book is largely a record of the intense conversation between Job and his friends who meant well but whose advice was completely wrong. They did not understand why Job was suffering, but each of them felt that they needed to provide an explanation.

The first friend was named **Eliphaz**. He was a philosopher and a practical man. A considerate and kind man, he based his opinions on experience. He believed that God is righteous and punishes the wicked. If you sin, you suffer. In 4:8 he says, "*As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it*" (NIV). In 5:17 he tells Job, "*Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty*" (NIV).

In other words, in his kind and gentle way, Eliphaz tells Job, “God is disciplining you. You have probably sinned and He is trying to help you.”

Such an explanation sounds not only good but biblical, doesn’t it? But it is wrong.

Job’s second friend is named **Bildad**. He is a historian with a love for tradition. His argument can be best summed up in 8:8: “*Ask the former generations and find out what their fathers learned*” (NIV).

Unlike Eliphaz, who is polite, Bildad likes to argue and is strongly opinionated. His conviction is that God is a strict judge whose laws cannot be moved. “You must be sinning,” he tells Job. “Sin leads to suffering. Therefore, if you suffer, you must be sinning.”

It is a very logical argument. It too sounds biblical, doesn’t it? But God says he is wrong.

The third friend is a blunt man named **Zophar**. He has no time to listen to Job’s cries of innocence. “You are sinning,” he says. “God is unbending and merciless and he has no time to waste on the wicked. The life of the wicked is brief and unhappy. Look at you. You are suffering. Your life is miserable. Therefore, you have sinned. There is no doubt about it.”

Zophar has a very simple way of looking at life. He seems to have a view of God that is very straightforward. But God says that Zophar is wrong.

There is a fourth man, who sits through all the talk, listening without saying a word. He is not called a “friend” of Job by the text, and this is probably because he is much younger than the rest. His name is **Elihu**. He is a theologian and an intellectual. His is the voice of logic, education, and reason. He is very perceptive. He knows that the views of the other three are simplistic, but though he fills the air with words, Elihu really doesn’t have anything new to say. He essentially repeats what the others have said, but in fancier language.

To summarize, all four come to the conclusion that Job must be suffering because of sin. They encourage Job not to lose faith and they believe that ultimately, when Job finally learns his lesson and repents, his fortunes will be restored. In their theology, God will always see to it that the wicked are destroyed and the good prosper.

But these words ring hollow to Job. Do you realize how horrible they must have sounded to him? You can hear him crying out, “Are you saying that my children died because they were wicked? Are you saying that I am wicked and this is why this has happened to me? How can this be? I have tried to follow God faithfully all of my life. What did I do that is so much worse than you that I deserve such a fate?”

Job doesn’t claim to be perfect, but he knows that he has tried, and if God is the God that these men say He is, then God is hardly a loving God. Rather, He must be

a God who goes around spying on people, ready to strike them every time they do something wrong.

This is how many people view God, isn't it? Is it right? Is it good theology?

The fundamental question to ask when reading the book of Job is the obvious one: "Why was Job suffering?" As we read the book, however, we must remember that we are granted a perspective that Job was not. Job did not have the opportunity to peak through the crack in the curtains of heaven like we do.⁵⁸ We know why Job was suffering. He did not. His friends did not know. At the time, only God, the angels, and Satan knew. And, for reasons known only to Himself, God chose not to tell Job.

Looking back at Job from the perspective that God allows us to have, peering through the cracks in the curtain into the courts of heaven, overhearing the conversations between God and Satan, we learn that with suffering there is often mystery, unanswered questions, and things we will never understand this side of eternity. There are things going on that we may never know about. Job didn't know that his suffering was because God had allowed Satan to beat on him in order to prove Job's faithfulness. And, as far as we know, God never revealed this to Job during his lifetime.

There is often mystery with suffering. The question is whether there can also be faith (Luke 18:8). Will we exhibit a trust in God who may not answer our "Why's"? As many of us would in similar (and even lesser) situations, Job earnestly wanted to know the reason why he was afflicted so severely. But when God responds, He responds in chapters 38—41 not with answers to the reasons why Job suffers but with a revelation of Himself. By revealing who He is, in effect, God reminds Job that the primary quest for the believer in the face of unjust suffering is not an explanation for the question "Why?" but an answer to the question "Who?" Job is reminded of God's power, His wisdom, and His control over creation. In effect, God's answer to Job is, "This is the kind of God I am. I know what is going on and you do not. Your life is still under my control and care. Will you trust me?" And this answer is supposed to be good enough for Job.

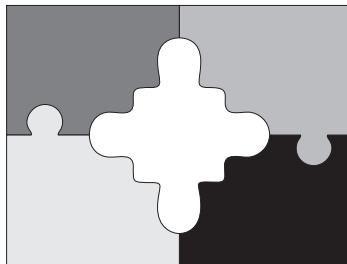
The book of Job also helps us to understand that suffering is not always the result of sin, or even that it is God's way of purifying and/or teaching us, as we saw in the section "Suffering as Discipline." Job's friends limited themselves to this answer and it was for this reason that God condemned them (Job 38:2; 42:8). Additionally, a careful study of God's disciplinary use of suffering would seem to validate the claim that if one cannot honestly identify what God is leading you to repent of, then it is doubtful that this is God's purpose at the time. Surely, God does not punish without convicting. Punishment without conviction would be vindictive, as would punishment after confession and repentance.

My advice to those undergoing suffering would be to carefully go before God, honestly seeking His face and asking for His Spirit to examine your heart and life. If God does not convict you of sin or if sincere confession and repentance does not remedy the situation, then, in my opinion, it would be fair to say that there are other factors at work in this situation. The call, then, is to continue to love and trust Him, knowing that this response reveals Satan's accusations to be lies.

Job's friends had committed the logical fallacy of concluding that "some equals all"—if suffering is sometimes used by God to punish His child for unrepented sin, then, they concluded, all suffering is God's punishment. This is revealed in the book of Job as being far too narrow a perspective and impugns the character of God. This is something that God cannot ignore. At the end of the book, in a surprising and ironic twist, Job's friends are called to repent in the same way that they had called upon Job to do. Is it also not ironic that these men who needed to repent were not suffering because of their sins, while Job, who spoke rightly about God, sat before them afflicted? This fact alone should keep us from the fallacy of believing that God mechanically operates by the principle of "cause and effect."

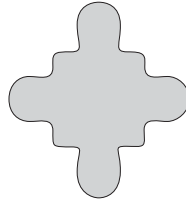
In the face of much contemporary teaching that sounds remarkably similar to that of Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu, we need to remember that *Job's suffering was a direct result of his faithfulness to God*. This flies in the face of popular prosperity and Word of Faith teaching that claims that faithfulness always results in material blessing, physical health, and personal peace. This is too simplistic a worldview and one that ignores the plain account of this remarkable man who suffered specifically *because* of his faith, even though he didn't know it at the time.

In seeking to gain a biblical perspective on suffering and the plan of God, I often found it helpful to equate our lives to that of a jigsaw puzzle. Made up of separate pieces which, by themselves, rarely make sense, put together they can create a beautiful picture.



The problem that we face, in our finiteness and sinfulness, is that we cannot presently see how the pieces, the separate incidents and circumstances of our life, fit

together. We do not have the omniscience to see the big picture, and our life is not finished yet. At any moment of our life, the best we can do is look at one piece of the puzzle at a time, and there is no way to accurately describe how the rest of the picture will look by viewing only one piece.



If we insist on finding meaning in every isolated detail or circumstance of our life, we will inevitably come to wrong conclusions. Life cannot make sense one piece at a time. We must wait until the picture is complete.

The thought that should comfort us is that while we cannot see the “big picture,” we know that God does. Like Job, we can be reminded that nothing comes into our life of which God is not intimately aware. He knows why every piece of the puzzle of our life is there and how, without it, our life would be incomplete. Our calling, like Job’s, is to trust Him, even if we do not understand at the time, knowing that nothing comes into our life that does not first pass through God’s sovereign hands.

Psalms

When attempting to ascertain and communicate the teachings of a book like Psalms, the issue is not a lack of information. Rather, it is the opposite. Psalms is a massive section of poetic literature with varied styles and themes. Determining which Psalms would assist in our development of a biblical theology of persecution is difficult, for the New Testament authors quote from Psalms more than from any other Old Testament book.

It is important to remember that the Bible of the early church was almost exclusively the Old Testament. The New Testament writings were gradually emerging, but when the New Testament writers needed to reference sacred Scripture, it was to the Old Testament that they referred. Additionally, the New Testament writers were Jewish and the Hebrew Scriptures had been ingrained in them from childhood. They knew the Psalms as prayers of praise and lamentation by heart and experience. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that when they underwent the fires of persecution, they kept the flame of faith alive by bringing to memory the communal and individual psalms of lament that they had prayed many times before.⁵⁹

Hence, when these first-century Jews witnessed the suffering of Jesus and their own sufferings, they drew upon one thousand years of history and empathetic tragedy of the Jewish people.⁶⁰ They saw the texts take on a new life, with evidence yet again of the suffering, killing, and injustice experienced by the righteous at the hands of the wicked as expressed in the Psalms. They saw the continuity of their present sufferings with those suffered by the saints of old. The citing of passages from the Psalms by the New Testament writers is far more than just proof texting or using the verses as secondary citations. The Psalms are utilized as primary sources, investing the words of the New Testament with validation and authority. By including the various references from the Psalms in their written accounts of the passion of Jesus, the authors lifted the suffering of Christ beyond their own locale and identified it with the broader dimensions of the suffering servant.⁶¹

To focus our study, we will first look at which psalms were referenced in the New Testament in regard to persecution, and how the early church used Psalms in their discussion of persecution and discipleship. We will conclude with a brief discussion of the imprecatory (cursing) psalms.

Psalms Used in the New Testament in Regards to Persecution

Without going into an exhaustive study of the use of the Psalms in the New Testament, it is important to briefly discuss the hermeneutical principles that the New Testament authors used.⁶² Most frequently, the writers used quotations from the Psalms to reassert universal absolutes that have been forever settled in heaven and were found within the context of all of Scripture. C. H. Dodd asserts that in most cases when the New Testament authors quoted from the Psalms and other Old Testament books, they intended to use these verses as pointers to the whole context in which they were originally found.⁶³ The reader was to consider the total context of the referenced passage and not simply the isolated verse as if it were a proof text.

The New Testament authors also used the Psalms to derive secondary implications from the text that were applicable to the first-century setting. Recognizing that the biblical texts can give rise to secondary implications, the authors did not always confine themselves to the primary meaning of a text in its original context. The New Testament authors also occasionally used familiar words and concepts found in the Psalms in their writings, without intending to fully represent the original text or to apply it to a new context.

Psalm 22

Psalm 22 is obviously one of the major Old Testament passages that the early church saw as a testimony to the gospel facts or as disclosing the determined plan of

God.⁶⁴ Matthew, Mark, John, Paul, and the author of Hebrews all refer to this psalm. Verses 1 and 18 are specifically quoted and verses 6, 21, and 22 are alluded to.

Hanging on the cross, knowing that His Father is not going to intervene in His behalf, Jesus is reminded of a prayer He has known from childhood, an agonized cry wrenched from the heart of another servant of God in a time of trial:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

*Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? (22:1)*⁶⁵

Jesus' use of Psalm 22 is significant. We know that the Jews had regular, formalized worship three times daily, including readings from the Law and the Prophets and singing of Psalms. The Psalms constituted their hymn book, and most faithful Jews would have had the psalms memorized. "My God, my God," is the beginning of Psalm 22 and the Jews at the foot of the cross would have recognized this. Some of them would have remembered that Psalm 22 begins in apparent defeat or tragedy, but ends in triumph. Undoubtedly some would have asked, "How can He be quoting something that has a happy ending as the life drains from him—where is the hope of which the Psalm speaks?" Some, in Matthew's account, mistakenly took the Aramaic "Eli, Eli" to be a cry for Elijah to come and save him.

For those of His followers who stayed with Him, one wonders how much they would have considered that this incident, like the psalmist's, would ultimately end happily. Given Matthew's account of the incident, it is obvious that some, like Jesus, recognized, as they looked around them, the prophecies in the middle section of Psalm 22 being fulfilled before their very eyes: "*They open wide their mouths at me . . . They have pierced my hands and my feet . . . They stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*" Hearing Jesus' words and seeing the events unfolding around them, the words of this psalm must have been running through the minds of those faithful Jews who stayed at the cross when most of Jesus' other followers had fled. As John witnessed the soldiers dividing Jesus' clothing as He hangs on the cross, he sees a parallel to the plight suffered by the psalmist in Psalm 22:18:

*They divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots.*⁶⁶

As recorded in the psalm, the wicked loot the righteous with callous indifference and ruthlessness. The innocent victim is left helpless in his nakedness.

Together with Isaiah 53:3, the words of Psalm 22:6, "*But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people,*" are alluded to by Mark.⁶⁷ Mark 9:12 refers to the fact that "*it is written of the Son of Man that he should suffer*

many things and be treated with contempt.” Psalm 22, as a whole, should have been prime source material to support this.

Allen notes that Psalm 22:21 is likely what Paul is referring to in 2 Timothy 4:17, speaking of his first defense before Nero where he was acquitted.⁶⁸

*Save me from the mouth of the lion!
You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen!*

Before and during his first legal hearing before Nero, apparently Paul prayed the lament section of Psalm 22 and upon receiving the favorable outcome, he “transformed the petition into an element of thanksgiving, namely the report of God’s intervention.”⁶⁹ Now, as he faces his second trial, which he does not expect will end with similar deliverance, he still remains confident of God’s ability to deliver him from every evil attack and to bring him safely to God’s eternal kingdom (2 Timothy 4:18).

The words of verse 22, “*I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you,*” are quoted in Hebrews 2:12. Because of the suffering that He endured, Jesus has been crowned with glory that is to be shared with all mankind. This is what is referred to in Psalm 22:22. The suffering that Christ endured, as seen throughout the psalm, resulted in glory that will be shared with all those whom He is not ashamed to call brothers (Hebrews 2:11).⁷⁰

Psalm 31

*Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. (31:5)*

Luke records these as Jesus’ final words on the cross before He dies (Luke 23:46). Jesus’ final words are an acknowledgment of God’s continued faithfulness in the midst of horrible persecution even to the point of death. As Dalglish poignantly writes:

This psalm is an individual psalm of lament, passionately relating how the writer fought his way through the hatred of his enemies, yet amid the many changing moods of his woe ultimately realized the peace of God. It is illustrative of the suffering servant, particularly expressed in Isa. 53:7f.⁷¹

The words of 31:13b, “*they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life,*” helped “mould Matthew’s account of the conspiracy of the Sanhedrin” in Matthew 26:3,4.⁷² The righteous man (exemplified by Christ) is not protected from the scheming of the wicked. Yet, he continues to put his trust in God (31:14).

Psalm 34

Psalm 34, although it confesses in verse 19 that “*many are the afflictions of the righteous,*” is primarily a psalm of praise for deliverance of those who fear God from the hands of those who seek them harm.

The following verses find echo in the New Testament:⁷³

- Psalm 34:8 – 1 Peter 2:3
- Psalm 34:10⁷⁴ – Luke 1:53; 6:24,25
- Psalm 34:12–16 – 1 Peter 3:10–12
- Psalm 34:20 – John 19:36⁷⁵
- Psalm 34:22⁷⁶ – Iutroun

John’s use of Psalm 34:20 is particularly interesting. Dalglish comments:

Bones provide the skeletal framework for the body. In Hebrew thought, they were considered an index of health and became a synonym for oneself. In the rough world of the Old Testament it was not an uncommon scene for the righteous to endure multiple fractures (Mic. 3:2f.), not to mention death itself. What the proverb asserts paradoxically is this: There are no vicissitudes in life that can rob the righteous of his character, or fracture his integrity, however many broken bones he may have to sustain in his struggle.

The evangelist describes the post-mortem examination of Jesus by the soldiers and enters this into the narrative: For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled, “Not a bone of him shall be broken” (Jn. 20:36).

The quotation embellishes the entire scene with liturgical overtones from the Passover; it is tacitly identifying Jesus as the Lamb of God. But it portrays him as the martyr who maintained unsullied his dignity and his integrity. The thoughtful reader pauses at this juncture and reflects on the symbolism of the Lamb of God and of the indestructibility of the Martyr.⁷⁷

The use of Psalm 34 in 1 Peter is also illuminating, as 1 Peter was specifically written to those who were suffering because of their identification with Christ. In these passages, too, the call is to maintain one’s integrity in the midst of affliction. The New Testament authors obviously did not see the promises of deliverance in Psalm 34 as promises of deliverance from all harm, but as promises to not be destroyed.

Psalm 35

*Let not those rejoice over me
 who are wrongfully my foes,
 and let not those wink the eye
 who hate me without cause. (Psalm 35:19)*

Psalm 35 is quoted by John in 15:25 as part of Jesus' message to His disciples where He refers to the hatred that He and the Father have experienced from the world. In the same way as the psalmist was hated without cause, so are the Father and the Son. There is nothing that the Son has done to earn such hatred. In the verses prior to this, Jesus warns His disciples that "if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). This psalmist clearly was seen as teaching that to be unjustly hated was not a new experience for the righteous and would remain a present-day one.

Psalm 41

*Even my close friend in whom I trusted,
 who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me. (Psalm 41:9)*

If it is terrible to be afflicted by one's enemies, how much more terrible is it to be betrayed by one's close friend. Judas's betrayal is seen as this type of horrific infidelity in John 13:18.

Psalms 42,43

As Dodd notes, "These twin psalms are not psalms of suffering in the same sense as those which we previously examined, but they contain the complaint of one who is shut out of God's presence, but confidently hopes to be restored to it."⁷⁸ Three times the refrain, "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" is heard (42:5,11; 43:5). The Septuagint translates the phrase "cast down" as *perilupo~ ei* which is clearly echoed in Mark 14:34 (*perilupo~ ejstin hl yuchim*).⁷⁹ John 12:27, likewise, echoes the Septuagint translation of Psalm 42:6.⁸⁰ The gospel writers obviously felt that the emotions expressed in these Psalms accurately reflected an aspect of Jesus' passion.

Psalm 44

*Yet for your sake we are killed all the day long;
 we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered. (Psalm 44:22)*

As Paul considers the suffering of God's messengers in Romans 8:36, he is reminded of Psalm 44. And while it is true that God's strength is available to the believer to stand firm in the midst of the flames of hostility (8:35,37,38), the apostle also knows that pain and affliction await those who would follow God's way. They are not immune from it.

Cries of anguish escape from Christian lips as readily as from Israelite lips. In pastoral vein Paul lingered on the pangs of disorientation, for which the noblest of causes is no anodyne. It is in accord with this pastoral note that mention of suffering is tenderly wrapped with "the love of Christ" and "the love of God in Christ" (vv. 35,39).⁸¹

Psalm 69

Psalm 69 is one of the major Old Testament passages that the early church saw as a testimony to the gospel facts or as disclosing the determined plan of God. Psalm 69 is quoted or recalled in Matthew 27:34 (Psalm 69:21), Mark 15:36 (Psalm 69:21a), John 15:25 (Psalm 69:4) and 19:28 (Psalm 69:21b), Acts 1:20 (Psalm 69:25), and Romans 15:3 (Psalm 69:9b). It is hardly coincidental that five separate authors went to this psalm, even though they selected different verses to quote from.⁸²

The psalmist appeals to God out of a situation of dire distress. He describes his sufferings, which are endured in God's cause, and the malice of his enemies, prays for their overthrow and for his own deliverance, and ends with thankful praise to God for the certainty of salvation. Through most of the poem we suppose the writer to be speaking of his individual lot, but from time to time it is evident that he represents a larger unity, and in the end it is the salvation of Zion which is acclaimed. The intention of the New Testament writers is clearly to apply the whole to the sufferings and ultimate triumph of Christ.⁸³

Psalm 91

*For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.* (Psalm 91:11,12)

In the second temptation of Jesus, we find the tempter urging Jesus to cast Himself from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem thereby proving that He was the Son of God (Matthew 4:6; Luke 4:10,11). By quoting this psalm, Satan suggests that God has promised to deliver Jesus from all harm should He perform an act.

The nature of this temptation, as Dalglish rightly points out, is an ethical one: will Jesus use God's means of ambiguity, obedience, obscurity, weakness to achieve His purposes or will He use unworthy means such as power and public acclaim to accomplish this noble end?⁸⁴ Jesus rejects Satan's temptation by responding from Deuteronomy 6:16 with its command not to tempt the Lord. The temptation that Jesus is subjected to is to use earthly means to accomplish God's purposes.

God's messengers are still tempted in this way. But Jesus' rebuttal indicates that the promises of Psalm 91 are not universally applicable; they must be interpreted in the total context of the situation and in the larger reference of Scripture.⁸⁵ Indeed, a closer examination of the context of the verses themselves shows that the psalmist never intended them to be understood in the fashion in which the tempter used them. This is, indeed, a promise to deliver the righteous as they abide in God's shadow and walk in obedience and love toward Him (verses 1,14). The righteous can count on God's help when they call upon Him (verse 15) with the assurance that they shall not be ultimately destroyed by those who would ambush them.⁸⁶ The child of God can be assured of God's help in the midst of trouble but he should not presume upon God's protection if he acts autonomously or in contradiction to God's ways and means. It is enlightening to note that when Jesus claimed assurance from Psalms, it was when He was on the cross (Psalm 31:5; Luke 23:46).⁸⁷

Psalm 116

*I believed, even when I spoke,
"I am greatly afflicted."* (Psalm 116:10)

Psalm 116 is quoted by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:13 when he refers to the suffering that he has endured for the sake of the gospel. Dalglish observes:

Psalm 116 illustrates the continuity of suffering and faith throughout the centuries . . . Like the psalmist who recited his mead of affliction, the apostle Paul recited an intimate review of his personal suffering for the gospel, yet also like the psalmist triumphed over his lot by faith.⁸⁸

The apostle refuses to lose heart, even though he is wasting away (verse 16), just as the psalmist continued to trust in the midst of his affliction. Faith is not trusting despite adverse circumstances; it is trusting in the midst of them.

Psalm 118

*The LORD is on my side; I will not fear.
What can man do to me?* (Psalm 118:6)

In Hebrews 13:6, the author, expressing the confidence that God will never leave or forsake His people in their time of persecution, quotes from Psalm 118:6. This passage is to remind the readers that with God as their helper, man can do nothing autonomously. God is on the side of the righteous, or more literally translated, “for me.”⁸⁹ The psalmist is assured by the thought that if God is for him, what can man do?⁹⁰

The context of Hebrews helps us to understand that this “having God on our side” does not guarantee that harm may not come against us at the hand of man. To strengthen their wavering faith, the writer urges these believers in the following verse (13:7) to continually consider (look at again and again) the “*outcome of their way of life*” and commands them to imitate the faith of their leaders. The testimony and example of those who have successfully faced and overcome persecution should provide inspiration and hope to those who are wavering, as it reminds them of the constancy of God. The author emphasizes this in the following verse when he reminds them that “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*” (13:8).

The twenty-second and twenty-third verses of Psalm 118 are quoted more often than any other verses in the Psalms in reference to persecution.⁹¹

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone.
This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

Verse 22 is quoted in Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11, and 1 Peter 2:7, while verses 22 and 23 are quoted together in Matthew 21:42 and Mark 12:10,11.

In the context of the entire psalm, it is difficult to determine exactly what the psalmist was referring to in Psalm 118:22,23. Some suggest that it was a proverb of the day, expressing how what may appear to be a humiliation may turn into honor.⁹² In this context, this would refer to the king's apparent victory in battle in the face of apparent defeat. Dahood offers the suggestion that the stone refers to Israel, which, though considered unimportant by the great empires, received an honorable and important place in the building of God's kingdom.⁹³ In later times, Judaism applied this verse not only to the king, but also to the expected Messiah.⁹⁴ It would appear that the early church adopted this interpretation as well.

The references from Psalm 118 in the synoptic Gospels and Acts are universal in their identification of Jesus as the cornerstone that was rejected. Peter in his first epistle also refers to Jesus in this capacity (2:6–8) but he goes further. He notes that the Church is a house built on this rejected cornerstone (2:4). Hence, they are rejected too, as the context of the rest of the book makes clear.

How the Early Church Used Psalms in Their Discussion of Persecution and Discipleship

In the fourth century, Athanasius wrote a letter to fellow believer Marcellinus who apparently was recuperating from an illness and had decided to engage in a devotional study of the Psalms. Athanasius shares with him some words he claims to have heard from a “studious old man.” Whether this was a literary devise, disclaiming authorship for the sake of humility, or an actual fact is impossible to tell. In addition, the letter is undated. The only clue to the date may be the letter’s reference to persecution being a normal element of Christian life. This was certainly true before A.D. 313. There is also no reference to the Arian heresy that arose in A.D. 319. On the other hand, Athanasius may have written this letter during one of his four exiles for the sake of the faith between A.D. 335 and 366.

This letter provides tremendous pastoral advice on the use of the Psalms in the life of those undergoing persecution. Among other things, he writes:

So then, my son, let whoever reads this Book of Psalms take the things in it quite simply as God-inspired; and let each select from it, as from the fruits of a garden, those things of which he sees himself in need. For I think that in the words of this book all human life is covered, with all its states and thoughts, and that nothing further can be found in man. For no matter what you seek, whether it be repentance and confession, or help in trouble and temptation or under persecution, whether you have been set free from plots and snares or, on the contrary, are sad for any reason, or whether, seeing yourself progressing and your enemy cast down, you want to praise and thank and bless the Lord, each of these things the Divine Psalms show you how to do, and in every case the words you want are written down for you, and you can say them as your own.⁹⁵

Athanasius, throughout his letter, proposes Psalms that one might pray in the midst of persecution. The Psalter is seen as providing prayers that are honoring to God at a time of weakness.

For with these words they themselves pleased God, and in uttering them, as the Apostle says, they subdued kingdoms, they wrought righteousness, they obtained promises, they stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens, women received their dead by resurrection.

Let each one, therefore, who recites the Psalms have a sure hope that through them God will speedily give ear to those who are in need. For if a man be in trouble when he says them, great comfort will he find in them; if he be tempted or persecuted, he will find himself abler to stand the test and will experience the protection of the Lord, Who always defends those who say these words.⁹⁶

The Letter of Athanasius, Our Holy Father, Archbishop of Alexandria, To Marcellinus On the Interpretation of the Psalms⁹⁷

My dear Marcellinus,

Your steadfastness in Christ fills me with admiration. Not only are you bearing well your present trial, with its attendant suffering; you are even living under rule and, so the bearer of your letter tells me, using the leisure necessitated by your recent illness to study the whole body of the Holy Scriptures and especially the Psalms. Of every one of those, he says, you are trying to grasp the inner force and sense. Splendid! I myself am devoted to the Psalms, as indeed to the whole Bible; and I once talked with a certain studious old man, who had bestowed much labour on the Psalter, and discoursed to me about it with great persuasiveness and charm, expressing himself clearly too, and holding a copy of it in his hand the while he spoke. So I am going to write down for you the things he said.

Son, all the books of Scripture, both Old Testament and New, are *inspired by God and useful for instruction* [2 Tim 3:16], as it is written; but to those who really study it the Psalter yields especial treasure. Each book of the Bible has, of course, its own particular message: the Pentateuch, for example, tells of the beginning of the world, the doings of the patriarchs, the exodus of Israel from Egypt, the giving of the Law, and the ordering of the tabernacle and the priesthood; The Triteuch [Joshua, Judges, and Ruth] describes the division of the inheritance, the acts of the judges, and the ancestry of David; Kings and Chronicles record the doings of the kings, Esdras [Ezra] the deliverance from exile, the return of the people, and the building of the temple and the city; the Prophets foretell the coming of the Saviour, put us in mind of the commandments, reprove transgressors, and for the Gentiles also have a special word. Each of these books, you see, is like a garden which grows one special kind of fruit; by contrast, the Psalter is a garden which, besides its special fruit, grows also some those of all the rest.

The creation, for instance, of which we read in Genesis, is spoken of in Psalm 19, *The heavens declare the glory of God: and the firmament showest His handiwork*, and again in 24, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof: the inhabited earth and all that dwell therein. He Himself laid the foundations of it on the seas." The exodus from Egypt, which Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy record, is fitly sung in Psalms 78, 106, and 114. *When Israel came out of Egypt, says this last, the House of Jacob from among a foreign people, Judah became his holy place and Israel came under his authority. He sent Moses His servant, Psalm 105 declares, Aaron whom He had chosen. He showed the words of His signs among them, and of His wonders in the land of ham. Darkness He sent, and it was dark, and they were not obedient to his word. He turned their waters into blood and slew their fish: their land brought forth frogs, even in the king's apartments. He spake, and dog-flies came, and flies in all their quarters;* and so on, all through this Psalm and the next, we find the same things treated. As for the tabernacle and the priesthood, we have reference

to them in Psalm 29, sung when the tabernacle was carried forth, [This Psalm is heading in the Septuagint *A Psalm of David, when the Tabernacle went forth*] *Bring unto the Lord, ye sons of God, bring unto the Lord young rams, bring to the Lord glory and honour.*

The doings of Joshua, the son of Nun, and of the Judges also are mentioned, this time in Psalm 105, *They built them cities to dwell in and sowed fields and planted vineyards*, for it was under Joshua that the promised land was given into their hands. And when we read repeatedly in this same Psalm, *They cried unto the Lord in their trouble and He saved them out of their distress*, the period of the judges is referred to, for then it was that, when they cried to Him, He raised up judges to deliver them from their oppressors, each time the need arose. In the same way, Psalm 20 has the kings in mind when singing, *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will gain glory by the Name of the Lord our God. They are brought down and fallen, but we are risen and stand upright.* And Psalm 126 of the Gradual Psalms [Psalms 119–133] speaks of that which Esdras tells, *When the Lord turned the captivity of Sion, we became as those comforted*; and similarly Psalm 122, *I was glad when they said unto me, We will go into the House of the Lord. Our feet were set in thy gates, O Jerusalem! Jerusalem is built as a city that has fellowship within itself: thither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to testify to Israel.*

You see, then, that all the subjects mentioned in the historical books are mentioned also in one Psalm or another; but when we come to the matters of which the Prophets speak we find that these occur in almost all. Of the coming of the Saviour and how, although He is God, He yet should dwell among us, Psalm 50 says, *God shall come openly, even our God, and He shall not keep silence*; and in Psalm 118 we read, *Blessed is he that cometh in the Name of the Lord! We have blessed you from the House of the Lord. God is the Lord, and He has given us light.* That He Who comes is Himself the Father's Word, Psalm 107 thus sings, *He sent His Word and healed them, and rescued them out of all their distresses.* For the God Who comes is this self-same Word Whom the Father sends, and of this Word Who is the Father's Voice, Whom well he knows to be the Son of God, the Psalmist sings again in 45, *My heart is inditing of a good Word*; and also in 110, *Out of the womb, before the dawn, have I begotten Thee.* Whom else, indeed, should any call God's very Offspring, save His own Word and Wisdom? And he, who knows full well that it was through the Word that God said, *Let there be light, Let there be a firmament. Let there be all things*, [Gen. 1:3 ff] says again in Psalm 33, *By the Word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the Breath of His mouth.*

And, so far from being ignorant of the coming of Messiah, he makes mention of it first and foremost in Psalm 45, *Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever, a scepter of justice is the sceptre of Thy kingdom. Thou has loved righteousness and hated lawlessness: wherefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.* Further, lest any one should think this coming was in appearance only, Psalm 87 shows that He Who was to come should both come as man and at the same time be He by Whom all things were made. *Mother Sion shall say, A man, a man indeed is born in her: and He himself, the Most Highest, founded her*, it says; and that is equivalent to saying *The Word was God, all things were made by Him, and the Word became flesh.* [Jn 1:1, 2, 14] Neither is

the Psalmist silent about the fact that He should be born of a virgin—no, he underlines it straight away in 45, which we were quoting, but a moment since. *Harken, O daughter, he says, and see and incline thine ear, and forget thine own people and thy father's house. For the King has desired thy beauty, and He is thy Lord.* Is not this like what Gabriel said, *Hail, thou that art full of grace, the Lord is with thee?* [Lk 1:28] For the Psalmist, having called Him the Anointed One, that is Messiah or Christ, forthwith declares His human birth by saying, *Harken, O daughter, and see;* the only difference being that Gabriel addresses Mary by an epithet, because he is of another race from her, while David fitly calls her his own daughter, because it was from him that she should spring.

Having thus shown that Christ should come in human form, the Psalter goes on to show that He can suffer in the flesh He has assumed. It is as foreseeing how the Jews would plot against Him that Psalm 2 sings, *Why do the heathen rage and peoples meditate vain things? The kings of the earth stood up and their rulers took counsel together against the Lord and against His Christ.* And Psalm 22, speaking in the Saviour's own person, describes the manner of His death. *Thou has brought me into the dust of death, for many dogs have compassed me, the assembly of the wicked have laid siege to me. They pierced my hands and my feet, they numbered all my bones, they gazed and stared at me, they parted my garments among them and cast lots for my vesture. They pierced my hands and my feet—*what else can that mean except the cross? and Psalms 88 and 69, again speaking in the Lord's own person, tell us further that He suffered these things, not for His own sake but for ours. *Thou has made Thy wrath to rest upon me,* says the one; and the other adds, *I paid them things I never took.* For He did not die as being Himself liable to death: He suffered for us, and bore in Himself the wrath that was the penalty of our transgression, even as Isaiah says, *Himself bore our weaknesses.* [Mt 8:17] So in Psalm 138 we say, *The Lord will make requital for me; and in the 72nd the Spirit says, He shall save the children of the poor and bring the slanderer low, for from the hand of the mighty He has set the poor man free, the needy man whom there was none to help* [Athanasius takes these last two quotations as referring to the Resurrection, although it is not named.]

Nor is this all. The Psalter further indicates beforehand the bodily Ascension of the Saviour into heaven, saying in Psalm 24, *Lift up your gates, ye princes, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the king of glory shall come in!* And again in 47, *God is gone up with a merry noise, the Lord with the voice of the trumpet.* The Session also it proclaims, saying in Psalm 110, *The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou on My right hand, until I make thine enemies the footstool of thy feet.* And Psalm 9 mentions also the coming destruction of the devil, crying, *Thou satest on Thy throne, Thou that judgest righteousness, Thou hast rebuked the heathen and the wicked one is destroyed.* And that He should receive all judgement from the Father, this also the Psalter does not hide from us, but foreshows Him as coming to be the judge of all in 72, *Give the King Thy judgements, O God, and Thy righteousness unto the King's Son, that He may judge Thy people in righteousness and Thy poor with justice.* In Psalm 50 too we read, *He shall call the heaven from above, and the earth, that He may judge His people. And the heavens shall declare His righteousness, that God is judge indeed.* The 82nd like-wise says, *God standeth in the assembly of gods, in the*

midst He judges gods. The calling of the Gentiles also is to be learnt from many passages in this same book, especially in these words of Psalm 47, *O clap your hands together, all ye Gentiles, shout unto God with the voice of triumph*; and again in the 72nd, *The Ethiopians shall fall down before Him, His enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarsis and of the islands shall bring presents, the kings of Arabia and Saba shall offer gifts.* All these things are sung of in the Psalter; and they are shown forth separately in the other books as well.

My old friend made rather a point of this, that the things we find in the Psalms about the Saviour are stated in the other books of Scripture too; he stressed the fact that one interpretation is common to them all, and that they have but one voice in the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, he went on, the opposite is true, to some extent; for, just as the Psalter includes the special subjects of all the other books, so also do they often contain something of the special feature of the Psalter. Moses, for example, writes a song; Isaiah does the same, and Habakkuk offers prayer in form of song. And in the same way in every book we see something alike of prophecy, of law-giving, and of history; for the same Spirit is in all and He, being by nature One and Indivisible, is given whole to each: yet is He diverse in His manifestations to mankind, and each one who is taught by and receives Him ministers the word according to the moment's need. Thus (as I said before) Moses is at times a prophet and a psalmist, and the Prophets on occasion both lay down laws (like *Wash you, make you clean. Wash clean your heart from wickedness, Jerusalem* [Is. 1:16; Jer. 4:14]), and also record history, as when Daniel relates the story of Susanna [Dan. 12] or Isaiah tells us about the Rab-shakeh and Sennacherib [Is. 36–37]. Similarly the Psalter, whose special function is to utter songs, generalizes in song matters that are treated in detail in the other books, as I have shown you. It also even lays down laws at times, such as *Leave off from wrath and let go displeasure, incline thine heart from evil and do good. Seek peace and ensue it*, as well as telling us the history of Israel's journey and prophesying the coming of the Saviour, as I said just now.

You see, then, that the grace of the one Spirit is common to every writer and all the books of Scripture, and differs in its expression only as need requires and the Spirit wills. Obviously, therefore, the only thing that matters is for each writer to hold fast unyieldingly the grace he personally has received and so fulfil perfectly his individual mission. And, among all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed, and seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given. Elsewhere in the Bible you read only that the Law commands this or that to be done, you listen to the Prophets to learn about the Saviour's coming, or you turn to the historical books to learn the doings of the kings and holy men; but in the Psalter, besides all these things, you learn about yourself. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you do not merely hear and then pass on, but learn the way to remedy your ill.

Prohibitions of evil-doing are plentiful in Scripture, but only the Psalter tells you how to obey these orders and abstain from sin. Repentance, for example, is enjoined repeatedly; but to repent means to leave off sinning, and it is the Psalms that show you how to set about repenting and with what words your penitence may be expressed. Again, **Saint Paul says, *Tribulation worketh endurance, and endurance experience, and experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed* [Rom. 5:3, 5]; but it is in the Psalms that we find written and described how afflictions should be borne, and what the afflicted ought to say, both at the time and when his troubles cease: the whole process of his testing is set forth in them and we are shown exactly with what words to voice our hope in God.** Or take the commandment, *In everything give thanks*. [1 Thess. 5:18] The Psalms not only exhort us to be thankful, they also provide us with fitting words to say. **We are told, too, by other writers that all who would live godly in Christ must suffer persecution; [2 Tim. 3:12] and here again the Psalms supply words with which both those who flee persecution and those who suffer under it may suitably address themselves to God, and it does the same for those who have been rescued from it.** We are bidden elsewhere in the Bible also to bless the Lord and to acknowledge Him: here in the Psalms we are shown the way to do it, and with what sort of words His majesty may meetly be confessed. In fact, under all the circumstances of life, we shall find that these divine songs suit ourselves and meet our own souls' need at every turn.

And herein is yet another strange thing about the Psalms. In the other books of Scripture we read or hear the words of holy men as belonging only to those who spoke them, not at all as though they were our own; and in the same way the doings there narrated are to us material for wonder and examples to be followed, but not in any sense things we have done ourselves. With this book, however, though one does read the prophecies about the Saviour in that way, with reverence and with awe, in the case of all the other Psalms it is as though it were one's own words that one read; and anyone who hears them is moved at heart, as though they voiced for him his deepest thoughts. To make this clear and, like Saint Paul not fearing somewhat to repeat ourselves, let us take some examples. The patriarchs spoke many things, all fitting to themselves; Moses also spoke, and God answered; Elijah and Elisha, seated on Mount Carmel, called upon the Lord and said, *The Lord liveth, before Whom I stand*. [See for Elijah I Kings 18:15, 19, and for Elisha II Kings 2:25 and 3:14.] And the other prophets, while speaking specially about the Saviour, addressed themselves also at times to Israel or to the heathen. Yet no one would ever speak the patriarchs' words as though they were his own, or dare to imitate the utterance of Moses or use the words of Abraham concerning the great Isaac, or about Ishmael and the home-born slave, as though they were his own, even though like necessity oppressed him. Neither, if any man suffer with those that suffer or be gripped with desire of some better thing, would he ever say as Moses said, *Show me Thyself*, [Ex. 33:13] or *If Thou remittest their sin; then remit it; but if not, then blot me out of Thy book that Thou hast written*. [Ex. 32:32] No more would any one use the prophets' words of praise or blame as though they were his own, or say, *The Lord lives, in Whose sight I stand today*. For he who reads those books is clearly reading not his own words but those of holy men

and other people about whom they write; but the marvel with the Psalter is that, barring those prophecies about the Saviour and some about the Gentiles, the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own, and each one sings the Psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person's feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering the words to God as his own heart's utterance, just as though he himself had made them up. Not as the words of the patriarchs or of Moses and the other prophets will he reverence these: no, he is bold to take them as his own and written for his very self. Whether he has kept the Law or whether he has broken it, it is his own doings that the Psalms describe; every one is bound to find his very self in them and, be he faithful soul or be he sinner, each reads in them descriptions of himself.

It seems to me, moreover, that because the Psalms thus serve him who sings them as a mirror, wherein he sees himself and his own soul, he cannot help but render them in such a manner that their words go home with equal force to those who hear him sing, and stir them also to a like reaction. Sometimes it is repentance that is generated in this way, as by the conscience-stirring words of Psalm 51; another time, hearing how God helps those who hope and trust in Him, the listener too rejoices and begins to render thanks, as though that gracious help already were his own. Psalm 3, to take another instance, a man will sing, bearing his own afflictions in his mind; Psalms 11 and 12 he will use as the expression of his own faith and prayer; and singing the 54th, the 56th, the 57th, and the 142nd, it is not as though someone else were being persecuted but out of his own experience that he renders praise to God. And every other Psalm is spoken and composed by the Spirit in the self-same way: just as in a mirror, the movements of our own souls are reflected in them and the words are indeed our very own, given us to serve both as a reminder of our changes of condition and as a pattern and model for the amendment of our lives.

This is the further kindness of the Saviour that, having become man for our sake, He not only offered His own body to death on our behalf, that He might redeem all from death, but also, desiring to display to us His own heavenly and perfect way of living, He expressed this in His very self. It was as knowing how easily the devil might deceive us, that He gave us, for our peace of mind, the pledge of His own victory that He had won on our behalf. But He did not stop there: He went still further, and His own self performed the things He had enjoined on us. Every man therefore may both hear Him speaking and at the same time see in His behaviour the pattern for his own, even as He himself has bidden, saying, *Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart.* [Mt. 11:29] Nowhere is more perfect teaching of virtue to be found than in the Lord's own life. Forbearance, love of men, goodness, courage, mercy, righteousness, all are found in Him; and in the same way no virtue will be lacking to him who fully contemplates this human life of Christ. It was as knowing this that Saint Paul said, *Be ye imitators of me, even as I myself am of Christ.* [1 Cor. 11:1] The Greek legislators had indeed a great command of language; but the Lord, the true Lord of all, Who cares for all His works, did not only lay down precepts but also gave Himself as model of how they should be carried out, for all who would to know and imitate. And therefore, before He came among us, He sketched the likeness of this perfect life for us in

words, in this same book of Psalms; in order that, just as He revealed Himself in flesh to be the perfect, heavenly Man, so in the Psalms also men of good-will might see the pattern life portrayed, and find therein the healing and correction of their own.

Briefly, then, if indeed any more is needed to drive home the point, the whole divine Scripture is the teacher of virtue and true faith, but the Psalter gives a picture of the spiritual life. And, just as one who draws near to an earthly king observes the formalities in regard to dress and bearing and the correct forms of words lest, transgressing in these matters, he be deemed a boor, so he who seeks to live the good life and learn about the Saviour's conduct in the body is by the reading of this holy book first put in mind of his own soul's condition and then supplied with fit words for a suppliant's use. For it is a feature of this book that the Psalms which compose it are of many different sorts. Some such as 73, 78, 114, and 115, are narrative in form; some are hortatory, like 32, 97, and 103; some are prophetic, for example, 22, 45, 47, and 110; some, in whole or part, are prayers to God, as are 6, 16, 54, 102; some are confessions, notably the 51st, some denounce the wicked, like 14; while yet others, such as 8, 98, 117, 125, and many more, voice thanksgiving, praise, and jubilation, Psalm 66 alone of these having special reference to the Resurrection of the Lord.

It is possible for us, therefore, to find in the Psalter not only the reflection of our own soul's state, together with precept and example for all possible conditions, but also a fit form of words wherewith to please the Lord on each of life's occasions, words both of repentance and of thankfulness, so that we fall not into sin; for it is not for our actions only that we must give account before the judge, but also for our every idle word. Suppose, then, for example, that you want to declare anyone to be blessed; you find the way to do it in Psalm 1, and likewise in 32, 41, 112, 119, and 128. If you want to rebuke the conspiracy of the Jews against the Saviour, you have Psalm 2. **If you are persecuted by your own family and opposed by many, say Psalm 3; and when you would give thanks to God at your affliction's end, sing 4 and 75 and 116. When you see the wicked wanting to ensnare you and you wish your prayer to reach God's ears, then wake up early and sing 5; and if you feel yourself beneath the cloud of His displeasure, you can say 6 and 38. If any plot against you, as did Ahithophel against David, and someone tells you of it, sing Psalm 7, and put your trust in God Who will deliver you.**

Contemplating humanity's redemption and the Saviour's universal grace, sing Psalm 8 to the Lord; and with this same Psalm or the 19th you may thank Him for the vintage. For victory over the enemy and the saving of created things, take not glory to yourself but, knowing that it is the Son of God Who has thus brought things to a happy issue, say to Him Psalm 9; and, if any wishes to alarm you, the 11th, still trusting in the Lord. When you see the boundless pride of many, and evil passing great, so that among men (so it seems) no holy thing remains, take refuge with the Lord and say Psalm 12. And if this state of things be long drawn out, be not faint-hearted, as though God had forgotten you, but call upon Him with Psalm 27. Should you hear others blaspheme the providence of God, do not join with them in their profanity but intercede with God, using the 14th and the 53rd.

And if, by way of contrast, you want to learn what sort of person is citizen of heaven's kingdom, then sing Psalm 15.

When, again, you need to pray against your enemies and those who straiten you, Psalms 17, 86, 88, and 140 will all meet your need; and if you want to know how Moses prayed, you have the 90th. [Headed in the Septuagint, A Prayer of Moses, Man of God.] **When you have been delivered from these enemies and oppressors, then sing Psalm 18;** and when you marvel at the order of creation and God's good providence therein and at the holy precepts of the Law, 19 and 24 will voice your prayer; while 20 will give you words to comfort and to pray with others in distress. When you yourself are fed and guided by the Lord and, seeing it, rejoice, the 23rd awaits you. **Do enemies surround you? Then lift up your heart to God and say Psalm 25, and you will surely see the sinners put to rout. If they persist, their murderous intent unslaked, then let man's judgement go and pray to God, the Only Righteous, that He alone will judge according unto right, using Psalms 26 and 35 and 43. If your foes press yet harder and become a veritable host, that scorns you as not yet anointed, be not afraid, but sing again Psalm 27** [The title of Psalm 27 in the Greek is Of David, before he was anointed. The Christian reference is to chrismation, i.e., Confirmation, which was conferred as part of the same rite with Baptism in the early Church]. **Pay no attention either to the weakness of your own humanity or to the brazenness of their attack, but cry unceasingly on God, using Psalm 28.** And when you want the right way of approach to God in thankfulness, with spiritual understanding sing Psalm 29. And finally, when you dedicate your home, that is your soul in which you receive the Lord and the house of your senses, in which corporeally your spirit dwells, give thanks and say the 30th and, from the Gradual Psalms [Psalms 119–133], the 127th.

Again, when you find yourself hated and persecuted by all your friends and kinsfolk because of your faith in Christ, do not despair on this account nor be afraid of them, but go apart and, looking to the future, sing Psalm 31. And when you see people baptized and ransomed from this evil world, be filled with wonder at the love of God for men, and in thanksgiving for them sing the 32nd. And whenever a number of you want to sing together, being all good and upright men, then use the 33rd. **When you have fallen among enemies but have escaped by wise refusal of their evil counsel, then also gather holy men together and sing with them the 34th. And when you see how zealous are the lawless in their evil-doing, think not the evil is innate in them, as some false teachers say, but read Psalm 36 and you will see they are themselves the authors of their sin. And if you see these same wicked men trying, among other evils, to attack the weak and you wish to warn their victims to pay no heed to them, nor envy them, since they will soon be brought to nought, both to yourself and others say the 37th.**

When, on the other hand, it is your own safety that is in question, by reason of the enemy's attacks, and you wish to bestir yourself against him, say the 39th; and if, when he attacks, you then endure afflictions, and wish to learn the value of endurance, sing Psalm 40. When you see people in poverty, obliged to beg their bread,

and you want to show them pity, you can applaud those who have already helped them and incite others to like works of mercy by using 41. Then again, if you are aflame with longing for God, be not disturbed at the reviling of your enemies but, knowing the immortal fruit that such desire shall bear, comfort your soul and ease your pains with hope in God, and say the 42nd. When you wish to recall in detail the loving-kindnesses which God showed to the fathers, both in their exodus from Egypt and in the wilderness, and to reflect how good God is and how ungrateful are men, you have the 44th, the 78th, the 89th, the 105th, 106th, 107th, and also the 114th and 115th. **And the 46th will supply your need when after deliverance from afflictions you flee to God, and want to give Him thanks and tell of all His loving mercy shown towards yourself.**

But suppose now that you have sinned and, having been put to confusion, are repenting and begging for forgiveness, then you have the words of confession and repentance in Psalm 51. Or you have been slandered, perhaps, before an evil king, and you see the slanderer boasting of his deed: then go away and say Psalm 52. And when they persecute and slander you, as did the Ziphites and the strangers to King David [1 Kings 23:13ff], be not disturbed but with full confidence in God sing praise to Him, using Psalms 54 and 56. **If still the persecution follows hard on you, and he who seeks your life enters (though he knows it not) the very cave in which you hide [1 Kings 24:3], still you must not fear; for even in such extremity as this you have encouragement in Psalm 57 and also in the 142nd. The plotter, it may be, gives orders that a watch be kept over your house, and yet you manage to escape; give thanks to God, then, and let Psalm 59 be written on your heart, as on a pillar, as a memorial of your deliverance. And if not only your enemies cast you in the teeth but those also whom you thought to be your friends reproach and slander you and hurt you sorely for a time, you can still call upon God for help, using Psalm 55. Against hypocrites and those who glory in appearances, say for their reproach the 58th. But against those whose enmity is such that they would even take away your life, you must simply oppose your own obedience to the Lord, having no fear at all but all the more submitting to His will as they grow fiercer in their rage, and your form of words for this will be the 62nd Psalm. Should persecution drive you to the desert, fear not as though you were alone in it, for God is with you, and there at daybreak you may sing to Him the 63rd. And if even there the fear of foes and their unceasing plots pursues you, be they never so many or so insistent in their search for you, still you must not yield; for the toy arrows of a child will be enough to wound them, while Psalms 64, 65, 70, and 71 are on your lips.**

The 65th Psalm will meet your need, whenever you desire to sing praise to God: and if you want to teach any one about the Resurrection, sing the 66th. When asking mercy from the Lord, praise Him with the 67th. When you see wicked men enjoying prosperity and peace and good men in sore trouble, be not offended or disturbed at it but say Psalm 73. When God is angry with His people, you have wise words of comfort in Psalm 74. When you have occasion to testify concerning God, 9, 71, 75, 92, 105 to 108, 111, 118, 126, 136, and 138 all fit the case; and Psalm 76, when used intelligently, provides you with an

answer for the heathen and the heretics, showing that the knowledge of God is not with them at all, but only in the Church. **And when the enemy takes possession of your place of refuge, even though sorely harassed and afflicted, do not despair but pray: and when your crying has been heard, give thanks to God, using Psalm 77. And if they have profaned the house of God and slain the saints, throwing their bodies to the birds of prey, do not be crushed or frightened at such cruelty, but, suffering with those that suffer it, plead you for them with God, using Psalm 79.**

Psalms 81 and 95 are suitable if you want to sing on a festival, together with other servants of the Lord; and when the enemy once more muster round you, threatening God's House and joining forces against His holy ones, do not you be frightened of either their numbers or their strength, for you have a very anchor of hope available in Psalm 83. If, moreover, you behold the House of God and His eternal dwelling, and have a longing for them, as the Apostle had, then say the 84th; and when at length their anger is abated and you are free again, voice your thanksgiving in the 85th and in the 116th. To see the difference between the Church and schism and to confound schismatics, you can say 87. To encourage yourself and others in the fear of God and to show how fearless is the soul that hopes in Him, say 91.

Do you want to give thanks on the Lord's Day? Then say the 24th; if on a Monday, then the 95th; and if on a Friday, your words of praise are in the 93rd, for it was when the Crucifixion was accomplished that the House of God was built, for all the enemy attempted to prevent it, so it is fitting we should sing on Friday a song of victory, such as that Psalm is. Psalm 96 is apt, if God's House has been captured and destroyed and then re-built; and when the land has rest from war and peace returns, sing that *The Lord is King* in 97. You want to sing on Wednesday? The Psalm then is 94; for it was on the fourth day from the Sabbath [This Psalm is headed in the Septuagint, A Psalm of David for the fourth day from do Sabbath] that the Lord through His betrayal entered on His Passion, by which He should redeem us and by the which He triumphed gloriously. So when you read in the Gospel how on the Wednesday the Jews took counsel against the Lord, seeing Him thus boldly challenging the devil on our behalf, sing the words of this Psalm 94. And again, when you see the providence and power of God in all things and want to instruct others in His faith and obedience, get them first to say the 100th Psalm. And when you have yourself experienced His power in judgement (for always His justice is tempered by His mercy) the next Psalm [101] will express your need.

If through the weakness of your nature and the strain of life you find yourself at times downcast and poor, sing for your consolation Psalm 102, and use the two that follow it [103, 104] to lift your heart in thankful praise to God, as in and through all circumstances we should always do. Psalms 105, 107, 113, 117, 135, and 146 to 150 not only show the reasons why God should be praised, but tell you how to do it. Have you faith, as the Lord bade, and believe in the prayers you utter? Then say the 116th Psalm, from the tenth verse on. You feel that, like the Apostle, you can now press forward, forgetting all the things that lie behind? [Phil. 3:14] Then you have the fifteen Gradual Psalms [Psalms 119–133] for every step of your advance.

Another time, perhaps, you find you have been led astray by others' arguments—well, then, the moment you perceive it, stop your sinning, sit down and weep, as they did of old by Babylon's waters, using the words of Psalm 137. Since it is precisely by being tempted that one's worth is proved, Psalm 139 will meet your need when you thank God for testing safely past. And if the enemy once more gets hold of you and you desire to be free, then say 140. For prayer and supplication, sing Psalms 5, 141 to 143, and 146. Has some Goliath risen up against the people and yourself? Fear not, but trust in God, as David did, and sing his words in Psalm 144. Then, marvelling at God's kindnesses to everyone and mindful of His goodness to yourself and all, praise Him, again in David's words, with Psalm 105. You want to sing to Him? Use 96 and 98. If, weak as you are, you yet are chosen for some position of authority among the brethren, you must not be puffed up as though you were superior to them, but rather glorify the Lord Who chose you and sing Psalm 151, which is especially the Psalm of David. And for Psalms in praise of God, having some of them the title *Alleluia*, you have all these, 105 to 107, 111 to 118, 135, 136, 146, 147, 148, 149, and 150.

If, again, you want to sing Psalms that speak especially about the Saviour, you will find something in almost all of them; but 45 and 110 to relate particularly to His Divine Begetting from the Father and His coming in the flesh, while 22 and 69 foretell the holy cross, the grievous plots He bore and how great things He suffered for our sakes. The 3rd and 109th also display the snares and malice of the Jews and how Iscariot betrayed Him; 21, 50, and 72 all set Him forth as judge and foretell His Second Coming in the flesh to us; they also show the Gentiles' call. The 16th shows His resurrection from the dead, in flesh, the 24th and 47th His ascension into heaven. And in the four Psalms 93, 96, 98, and 99, all the benefits deriving to us from the Saviour's Passion are set forth together.

Such, then, is the character of the Book of Psalms, and such the uses to which it may be put, some of its number serving for the correction of individual souls, and many of them, as I said just now, foretelling the coming in human form of our Saviour Jesus Christ. But we must not omit to explain the reason why words of this kind should be not merely said, but rendered with melody and song; for there are actually some simple folk among us who, though they believe the words to be inspired, yet think the reason for singing them is just to make them more pleasing to the ear! This is by no means so; Holy Scripture is not designed to tickle the aesthetic palate, and it is rather for the soul's own profit that the Psalms are sung. This is so chiefly for two reasons. In the first place, it is fitting that the sacred writings should praise God in poetry as well as prose, because the freer, less restricted form of verse, in which the Psalms, together with the Canticles and Odes, [The reference is probably to the hymns in Exodus 15:1–18, Deuteronomy 32:1–43, and Habakkuk 3, which are called Odes in the Septuagint. Some other Old Testament hymns, e.g., the Song of Hannah and the Benedicite, may be included.] are cast, ensures that by them men should express their love to God with all the strength and power they possess. And, secondly, the reason lies in the unifying effect which chanting the Psalms has upon the singer. For to sing the Psalms demands such concentration of a man's whole being on them that, in doing it, his usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved,

just as the notes of several flutes are brought by harmony to one effect; and he is thus no longer to be found thinking good and doing evil, as Pilate did when, though saying *I find no crime in Him*, [Jn. 18:38] he yet allowed the Jews to have their way; nor desiring evil though unable to achieve it, as did the elders in their sin against Susanna—or, for that matter, as does any man who abstains from one sin and yet desires another every bit as bad. And it is in order that the melody may thus express our inner spiritual harmony, just as the words voice our thoughts, that the Lord Himself has ordained that the Psalms be sung and recited to a chant.

Moreover, to do this beautifully is the heart's desire and joy, as it is written, *Is any among you happy? Let him sing!* [Jas. 5:13] And if there is in the words anything harsh, irregular or rough, the tune will smoothe it out, as in our own souls also sadness is lightened as we chant, *Why then art thou so heavy, O my soul, why dost thou trouble me?* and failure is acknowledged as one sings, *My feet were almost gone*, and fear is braced by hope in singing, *The Lord is my helper, I will not fear what man can do to me.*

Well, then, they who do not read the Scriptures in this way, that is to say, who do not chant the divine Songs intelligently but simply please themselves, most surely are to blame, for *praise is not befitting in a sinner's mouth.* [Ecclus 15:9] But those who do sing as I have indicated, so that the melody of the words springs naturally from the rhythm of the soul and her own union with the Spirit, they sing with the tongue and with the understanding also, and greatly benefit not themselves alone but also those who want to listen to them. So was it with the blessed David when he played to Saul: he pleased God and, at the same time, he drove from Saul his madness and his anger and gave back peace to his distracted spirit. In like manner, the priests by their singing contributed towards the calming of the people's spirits and helped to unite them with those who lead the heavenly choir. When, therefore, the Psalms are chanted, it is not from any mere desire for sweet music but as the outward expression of the inward harmony obtaining in the soul, because such harmonious recitation is in itself the index of a peaceful and well-ordered heart. To praise God tunefully upon an instrument, such as well-tuned cymbals, cithara, or ten-stringed psaltery, is, as we know, an outward token that the members of the body and the thoughts of the heart are, like the instruments themselves, in proper order and control, all of them together living and moving by the Spirit's cry and breath. And similarly, as it is written that *By the Spirit a man lives and mortifies his bodily actions*, [Rom. 8:13] so he who sings well puts his soul in tune, correcting by degrees its faulty rhythm so that at last, being truly natural and integrated, it has fear of nothing, but in peaceful freedom from all vain imaginings may apply itself with greater longing to the good things to come. For a soul rightly ordered by chanting the sacred words forgets its own afflictions and contemplates with joy the things of Christ alone.

So then, my son, let whoever reads this Book of Psalms take the things in it quite simply as God-inspired; and let each select from it, as from the fruits of a garden, those things of which he sees himself in need. For I think that in the words of this book all human life is covered, with all its states and thoughts, and that nothing further can be found in man. For no matter what you seek, whether it be repentance and confession, or help in trouble and

temptation or **under persecution, whether you have been set free from plots and snares** or, on the contrary, are sad for any reason, or whether, seeing yourself progressing and your enemy cast down, you want to praise and thank and bless the Lord, **each of these things the Divine Psalms show you how to do, and in every case the words you want are written down for you, and you can say them as your own.**

There is, however, one word of warning needed. No one must allow himself to be persuaded, by any arguments whatever, to decorate the Psalms with extraneous matter or make alterations in their order or change the words themselves. They must be sung and chanted in entire simplicity, just as they are written, so that the holy men who gave them to us, recognizing their own words, may pray with us, yes and even more that the Spirit, Who spoke by the saints, recognizing the selfsame words that He inspired, may join us in them too. For as the saints' lives are lovelier than any others, so too their words are better than ever ours can be, and of much more avail, provided only they be uttered from a righteous heart. **For with these words they themselves pleased God, and in uttering them, as the Apostle says, they subdued kingdoms, they wrought righteousness, they obtained promises, they stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens, women received their dead by resurrection.** [Heb. 11:33–36]

Let each one, therefore, who recites the Psalms have a sure hope that through them God will speedily give ear to those who are in need. **For if a man be in trouble when he says them, great comfort will he find in them; if he be tempted or persecuted, he will find himself abler to stand the test and will experience the protection of the Lord, Who always defends those who say these words.** By them too a man will overthrow the devil and put the fiends to flight. If he have sinned, when he uses them he will repent; if he have not sinned, he will find himself rejoicing that he is stretching out towards *the things that are before* [Phil. 3:16] and, so wrestling, in the power of the Psalms he will prevail. Never will such a man be shaken from the truth, but those who try to trick and lead him into error he will refute; and it is no human teacher who promises us this, but the Divine Scripture itself. For God commanded Moses to write the great song [Deut. 31:19] and to teach the people, and him whom He had appointed leader He bade also to write Deuteronomy, to have it ever in his hand and to meditate unceasingly upon its words [Deut. 17:18,19]; because these are sufficient in themselves both to call men's minds to virtue and to bring help to any who ponder them sincerely. It is a certain fact that when Joshua, the son of Nun, entered the land of promise and saw the ordered ranks of the heathen and the Amorite kings all drawn up against him [Josh. 8:9], in face of all these swords and weapons he read Deuteronomy in the ears of all and reminded them of the words of the Law, and then, having thus armed the people, he overcame the foe. King Josiah also, when the book was found, and had been read through to all, no longer feared his enemies. [4 Kings 22:8 (2 Kings 22:8)] And at any time when war was threatening Israel, the Ark in which the tables of the Law were kept was carried out before the host, and was sufficient help against any array, except when there was among those who bore it or, else-

where among the people, any prevailing hypocrisy or sin; [Josh. 3:2; 1 Kings 2–4 (1 Sam. 2–4)] for faith and an honest state of mind are always necessary if the Law is to be an effectual ally in the fulfilment of man's vows.

And I have heard, said the old man, from wise men, that in old days in Israel they put daemons to flight by reading of the Scriptures only, and in the same way uncovered plots made by them against men.

For this reason he rebuked as being worthy of the utmost condemnation people who neglect the Scriptures, while making use of impressive words from other sources for the purposes of exorcism so-called. [Acts 19:14–16] Those who did that were playing with the sacred words, he said, and offering themselves as to daemons, as did those Jews, the sort they tried in that way to exorcise the man at Ephesus. On the other hand, daemons fear the words of holy men and cannot bear them; for the Lord Himself is in the words of Scripture and Him they cannot bear, as they showed when they cried out to Christ, *I pray you, torment me not before the time*. [Lk. 8:28; Mt. 8:29] In the same way Paul commanded the unclean spirits, [Acts 16:18] and daemons were subject to the disciples. [Lk. 10:17] The hand of the Lord was on Elisha the prophet also, and he prophesied about the waters to three kings, when the minstrel played and sang according to His bidding. [4 Kings 3:15 (2 Kings 3:15)] So also is it with us today: if any one have at heart the interests of those who suffer, let him use these words, and he will both help the sufferer, let him use these words, and he will both help the sufferers more and at the same time prove his own faith to be true and strong; thus God, perceiving it, will grant the suppliants perfect health. Well knew the holy Psalmist that, when he said in Psalm 119, *I will meditate in Thy judgements: and I will not forget Thy words*; and again, *Thy statutes were my songs in the place of my sojourning*. For with these words they all worked out their own salvation, saying, *If Thy law were not my meditation, then had I perished in my humiliation*. Paul also strengthened his disciple with like words, saying, *Ponder these things, abide in them, that thy progress may be manifest*. [1 Tim. 4:15]

And so you too, Marcellinus, pondering the Psalms and reading them intelligently, with the Spirit as your guide, will be able to grasp the meaning of each one, even as you desire. And you will strive also to imitate the lives of those God-bearing saints who spoke them at the first.

The Imprecatory (Cursing) Psalms

How are we to take Psalm 58 with its prayer to God to smash in the teeth of their enemies (verse 6), and the expressed wish of the psalmist to have the righteous bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked (verse 10)? Or of Psalm 109 with its prayer that God would make the children of the wicked man fatherless and his wife a widow (verse 9)? And what of the author of Psalm 137 rejoicing at the thought of the little ones of Babylon being dashed against the rocks (verse 9)? How are these psalms to be reconciled with the teachings of Jesus to love one's enemies and to forgive them?

Several things need to be considered. First, it must be remembered that these are prayers for divine justice, not human grudges.⁹⁸ The petitioners are asking for God to take direct action; they do not ask for the power to take matters into their own hands and to be able to personally punish their foes, nor is permission ever granted for them to do so.⁹⁹ In these petitions, the psalmists pour out their pain, anger, and hurt. The tone is indicative of the horrors that they have faced.¹⁰⁰ They startle us into feeling something of the desperation that produced these words. But the psalmists do not hide these less “noble” sentiments from us, and God, in His sovereignty, inspired them to record them for our good. Among the lessons we may learn from their inclusion in the canon is the fact that God is less shockable than we are, looks beyond the words to the heart of the supplicant, and is afflicted in all our afflictions.¹⁰¹ Hence, He is pleased when His people pour out their hearts to Him in their entirety. Additionally, it should be noted that forgiveness of enemies and gaining God’s perspective are not found in concealing these emotions, but in acknowledging them to God, which is what these writers do.¹⁰² As Bonhoeffer writes, “It would mean much if we would learn that we must earnestly pray to God in such distress and that whoever entrusts revenge to God dismisses any thought of ever taking revenge himself.”¹⁰³

To rejoice in the fall of our enemies is also not strictly an Old Testament sentiment. The fall of Babylon in Revelation 18, for example, contains language reminiscent of the imprecatory psalms.¹⁰⁴ Jesus instructed His disciples to curse cities that did not receive them (Matthew 10:14). He Himself called down judgment on Bethsaida and Capernaum (Matthew 11:21–24). Paul declared a curse on anyone who did not love the Lord (1 Corinthians 16:22) and on anyone who preaches another Jesus (Galatians 1:8,9). The martyrs in heaven cry out for vengeance on those who killed them (Revelation 6:9,10). Hence, the desire to see justice is not strictly a reflection of a less graceful Old Testament disposition corrected in the revelation of Christ.

The imprecatory psalms also challenge the reader to identify with the oppressed and suffering, even though he himself may be quite comfortable.¹⁰⁵ They invite us to pray in behalf of others, as they evoke in us an awareness of the wickedness that is in the world. They may not, as Tate reminds us, be our prayers at the present moment, but they are the prayers of our brothers and sisters who are trampled down by persons and powers beyond their control.¹⁰⁶ The Christian church has long seen these psalms as the prayers of Christ on behalf of the suffering and needy. Bonhoeffer revived this old tradition in his small book *Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*¹⁰⁷ and his sermon on Psalm 58.¹⁰⁸ The incarnate Son of God, knowing all of our weakness, is able to stand in our place before God and pray these prayers on

our behalf. Hence, they really truly are our prayers, as well as His.¹⁰⁹ As the perfect Son of God, He is able to pray these prayers without guilt, which we cannot do for we are liable to be reminded of our own guilt and how we often act like those against whom we are praying. Hence, these psalms may awake in us an acute awareness of our own violent sins and hatred for others, and of our need for confession and repentance.¹¹⁰

Ecclesiastes

When faced with the reality of living in a world ravaged by the consequences of the Fall, the temptation is to retreat in one of two directions: false optimism or hopeless pessimism. It would not be difficult to cite examples of either, but this is not the purpose of this study. Ecclesiastes was written to counter both of these extremes and to provide a solidly balanced and biblical worldview. Ecclesiastes is a reality check.

Many find it puzzling when I tell them that Ecclesiastes is perhaps my favorite book of the Bible. The eyebrows rise even higher when I assert that, in my opinion, it is certainly one of the most practical books in Scripture. Unfortunately, I also think Ecclesiastes has been terribly misunderstood and not always well treated by commentators.¹¹¹

The point of Ecclesiastes is to remind the children of God that if they look for this life to make sense, they are bound to be disappointed. The scales often do not balance, right does not always prevail, and righteousness is not always rewarded. To put it bluntly, the author of Ecclesiastes says to us, “Get used to it. This is what it means to live in a fallen world.”

A careful study of Ecclesiastes reveals the fact that there are echoes of Genesis 3 throughout the book. Perhaps an apt title for the book would be “Life in a Fallen World.” The author of Ecclesiastes is brutally honest—perhaps more honest than we are used to. He strips away the rose-colored glasses we often wear as we view life, looks us in the eye, and says, “Get real. This is the way life is because of the Fall. If you insist on this life making sense and providing the fulfillment you need, you will either retreat into false optimism that ignores reality, or you will fall into despair.”

In the realm of Christian persecution, we could ask the author of Ecclesiastes, “Should we not be shocked when we see Christians being slaughtered?” He would answer, “Of course.”

“Should we be angry?” Yes!

“Should we do something about it?” By all means, we should.

“But should we be *surprised*?” No. Even as Christians, we live as fallen human beings in a fallen world. Hence, depraved behavior is to be expected.

Proverbs

Proverbs also notes that the righteous can expect suffering and persecution. Proverbs 29:10 reads, “*Bloodthirsty men hate one who is blameless and seek the life of the upright.*” Derek Kidner notes that the mixture of the plural noun (*upright*) and the singular noun (*one*) is a Hebrew idiom meaning “every single one.”¹¹² It is not safe to be righteous and upright in a world in rebellion against God, as the New Testament will bring into clearer perspective.

A significant contribution to the discussion of persecution and discipleship is the concept that individuals have “rights” according to Proverbs. Proverbs holds that individuals have rights that God’s people are called upon to defend and uphold.

Proverbs 29:7 asserts, “*A righteous man knows the rights of the poor; a wicked man does not understand such knowledge.*” In Proverbs 31:4,5 kings and leaders are instructed to remain sober “*lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.*” And in 31:8,9 we read:

*Open your mouth for the mute,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
Open your mouth, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

What are these rights? The Old Testament is replete with instruction on how society is obligated under the governance of God to treat its weakest, most defenseless members. Compassion is the claim that the weaker members of society have on the stronger for practical help, defense, and justice. These rights are instituted by God and possessed by all who are created in His image.¹¹³

As members of God’s family, we know that we are not forgotten by God, that God has covenanted with us never to leave or forsake us. God has bound Himself to us. As recipients of such grace, we are expected to demonstrate it to others, as we bind ourselves to them. It is bound up in the law of God to love our neighbor as ourselves, to do no harm. God’s love is only expressed by His people in community as we demonstrate His love for us to others by upholding and vigorously promoting their God-given rights to respectful treatment as bearers of the image of God.

The state, likewise, is under divine obligation. The task of the state, its *raison d’être* (as Jüngel puts it¹¹⁴) is soberly defined in the Barmen Theological Declaration as “maintaining justice and peace . . . in this still unredeemed world.”¹¹⁵ Commenting on this, Jüngel notes that the “justice and peace” referred to here are:

. . . the goods which, in the still-unredeemed world, are *indispensable* for human life and for life together, but which are clearly *threatened* and must be specially safeguarded. If this care for peace and justice were not necessary, then peace

and justice in the not-yet-redeemed world would go without saying and there would be no need for the state. But peace and justice must be cared for expressly, because peace and justice in human co-existence are constantly threatened by that very co-existence.”¹¹⁶

The Barmen Theological Declaration

1. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (Jn. 14:6). “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber . . . I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (Jn. 10:1,9).

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historical figures, and truths as God’s revelation.

2. “Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

As Jesus Christ is God’s comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, and with equal seriousness, he is also God’s vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life. Through him there comes to us joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world for free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

3. “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body [is] joined and knit together” (Eph. 4:15f).

The Christian church is the community of brethren in which, in Word and sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ is present and active as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone, and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.

We reject the false doctrine that the church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.

4. "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mt. 20:25f).

The various offices in the church do not provide a basis for some to exercise authority over others but for the ministry with which the whole community has been entrusted and charged to be carried out.

We reject the false doctrine that, apart from this ministry, the church could, and could have permission to, give itself or allow itself to be given special leaders [Fuhrer] vested with ruling authority.

5. "Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Pet. 2:17).

Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the state, in this still unredeemed world in which also the church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, his appointment. It draws attention to God's kingdom [Reich], God's commandment and justice, and with these the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the state should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfill the vocation of the church as well.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity which belong to the state and thus become itself an organ of the state.

6. "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28:20). "The word of God is not fettered" (2 Tim. 2:9).

The church's commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ's stead, and so in the service of his own Word and work, to deliver to people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God.

We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self-chosen desires, purposes and plans.

The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgment of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a confederation of Confessional Churches. It calls upon all who can stand in solidarity with its Declaration to be mindful of these theological findings in all their decisions concerning church and state. It appeals to all concerned to return to unity in faith, hope and love.

Verbum Dei manet in aeternum.

THUS SAYS THE LORD: INSIGHTS FROM THE PROPHETS

Isaiah

Earlier we discussed how suffering in the life of the people of God is described in Scripture as being the result of: 1) a punishment for sin, 2) discipline with the purpose of training and educating, or 3) one's relationship with and loyalty to the living God.

The prophet Isaiah focuses on a fourth dimension of the concept of suffering, introduced in Genesis 3:14, which builds on the third: to accomplish the purposes of God.

Isaiah's prophecy revealed suffering as being a method used by God of accomplishing His purposes for the world. In fact, it is revealed to be God's primary way of accomplishing His will of restoring His creation. The solution to the problem of suffering, pain, and death is found, paradoxically, in suffering, pain, and self-sacrifice to the point of death.¹¹⁷

In Isaiah's account, we meet a Person who has been called to live a life of suffering and humility; He has been called to die not for His own sins—for He has none—but for the sins of other people, for the salvation of others from the dreadful consequences of their sins. The Servant has been called to voluntarily accept suffering and death for others, being assured that He will have a great reward in seeing “the result of the anguish of His soul” (53:11); He will also be exalted to the position of highest honor.¹¹⁸

This revelation about suffering as a method used by God as His means of dealing with and solving mankind's most fundamental problem “becomes the most important and the most essential idea of the Judeo-Christian religion.”¹¹⁹ In chapters 40—66, Isaiah introduces us to a character he calls the Servant of God, through whom He will implement this plan.

To devote extensive study into the details of Isaiah's prophecy would take us beyond the scope of this research. It is sufficient to note that God chooses to fulfill His purposes specifically through suffering and self-sacrifice; indeed He has no other method than the one He uses through His suffering Servant. And those who follow this suffering Servant, Isaiah reveals, will themselves be called to a life of suffering and self-sacrifice. Ton notes:

God's special Servant will execute this plan, but this Servant of God will only be the initiator, the spearhead, and the trailblazer, because the remnant of God's

people are called to follow the Servant, to imitate Him, and to continue His ministry by using the same method of suffering and of self-sacrifice.¹²⁰

In Isaiah 50:6,7 Isaiah announces for the first time the reproach and suffering that the innocent Servant of God will go through. In verse 10, the emphasis shifts to those who fear the Lord and listen to the Servant and obey His voice. Though they fear the Lord and obey the voice of the true Servant of God, they walk in darkness and are without light. Young argues that the verb used for “walk” here refers not to the past, prior to their trust, but to a present condition that they are actually experiencing.¹²¹ In the midst of such a hopeless and despondent situation, the follower of the Servant is to put his trust in the Lord who cannot forsake or deceive him.¹²² Young explains:

Thus, those who fear the Lord and obey the voice of His true Servant may nevertheless be in darkness. Like the Servant Himself, they too must be subject to affliction and follow their Lord through afflictions, death and hell that they may come to the celestial city. In this world they will have tribulation; but the Servant has overcome this world, and they have but one recourse, to trust in the Lord who has revealed Himself to them in his ways and works, and to lean for support upon their God, who will never fail them.¹²³

Ton argues that Isaiah 50:11 also refers to the suffering that the servants of the Servant of the Lord must undergo.¹²⁴ Young’s idea, however, that the grammatical emphasis on the fact that the fire belongs to those who have kindled it (“*your fire*”) and that the torches are those which they have burned (“*your torches*”) leads me away from Ton’s interpretation, as attractive as it may be.¹²⁵ I am inclined to see this verse as a description of the punishment that awaits those who persecute the Servant and His servants. The destruction that they prepare for the Servant of the Lord becomes their own.¹²⁶

This does not, however, detract from Ton’s assertion that from 50:10 to 52:13, when the Servant of the Lord is again addressed, the entire emphasis of this section is the plight of those who follow the suffering Servant.¹²⁷ In the midst of such darkness, God will establish His law and justice as a “*light to the peoples*” (51:4). He will provide comfort to His people (51:3,12), even though they seem to be so small in number in a hostile world. God encourages them in 51:2 to look to Abraham and Sarah, to recall how God took two people and turned them into a nation. In the face of opposition and reproach, the Lord encourages His people not to fear the reproach of man or be dismayed (51:7). Just as the enemies of the Servant will perish (50:9), so will those who revile God’s people (51:8). Ton writes:

It is important that just before God gives this message to His servants, the Servant Himself declared that He did not shrink back from the beatings or from shame and humiliation. Now it is the servant's turn to go through the same kind of treatment for the same kind of ministry.¹²⁸

Rather than focusing on their own weakness, the people are encouraged to look to the power of God who can turn the wilderness into fertility (51:3,13,15). God puts His word in their mouth and covers them in the shadow of His hand, calling them His people (51:16). Still they will suffer affliction (51:17–21), but in time, God will take the cup of staggering from Israel and place it in the hands of those who tormented them (51:22,23). As God restores the fortunes of His people (52:1–6), He sends forth messengers to announce their deliverance (52:7–12). Isaiah 52:13—53:12 returns to the theme of the suffering Servant, demonstrating even more graphically that through His suffering and death He will accomplish the purposes of God in reconciling the world to God.

Jeremiah

No other messenger of God faced persecution to the same extent as Jeremiah. Called to the prophetic ministry in the thirteenth year of King Josiah, king of Judah, Jeremiah began his ministry probably around the age of 18 at a time when a religious reformation was just starting.¹²⁹

For the first twenty years of his ministry, he would have witnessed tremendous religious freedom in his nation. The land was full of prophets proclaiming what they called “the Word of the Lord.” But to the discerning eye of Jeremiah, he saw that much of the reform was largely outward and concerned the form of worship. The Lord Himself told the prophet, “*Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense*” (3:10).

Preaching repentance and warning the people about what awaited them if they did not return to the Lord in sincerity, we find no record that Jeremiah faced opposition during the reign of Josiah.

The death of Josiah marked the beginning of the end for the southern kingdom, although Jerusalem was to stand as the capital of Judah for twenty-two more years. We read in 2 Chronicles 35:25 that Jeremiah lamented for Josiah.

Jehoahaz, the son of Josiah, succeeded to the throne, but his reign lasted only three months before the Pharaoh Necho of Egypt invaded Judah, took Jehoahaz captive and replaced him with his brother Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim was a ruthless, wicked man who ruled for eleven years. Most of Jeremiah's message was recorded during this reign.

As Jeremiah continued to preach the message of repentance that God had given him, almost immediately upon the ascension of Jehoiakim to the throne, the plots against Jeremiah's life began. First, the people of his own hometown, the village of Anathoth, a suburb of Jerusalem, plotted to kill him (11:18–23). When the Lord revealed their plot to him, Jeremiah bitterly complained, “*I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying... let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.*”

He asks the question that Bible writers seem most perplexed by: “Why do the wicked prosper while God's faithful people must suffer? (12:1). The Lord answered that this is only a mild beginning.

If you have raced with men on foot, and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan? (12:5)

In other words, “You haven't seen anything yet, Jeremiah. Wait until things get really bad. Your brothers, your own family, have betrayed you” (12:6).

The race with the horses was not long in coming. Jeremiah is commanded to go to Jerusalem to preach. When he does, the religious leaders turn against him as he condemns the false teaching and hypocrisy of the priests and prophets.

Finally in 20:1–3, the overseer of the temple has him arrested, beaten, and put in stocks. Coming from a priestly home himself (1:1), seeing the religious leaders arrayed against him must have been especially difficult for Jeremiah.

It is significant that when he is released from the stocks by Pashur, the overseer of the temple, he does not say one word about the physical discomfort he endured. Instead, he speaks of the derision that was heaped upon him, and we can imagine how the best people in Judah, who still came to the temple to worship, ridiculed him as he sat as an evildoer in the stocks by the wayside. He says, “I am in derision daily, everyone mocks me (20:7) . . . My days are consumed with shame (20:18).”

What makes this mockery so much more difficult to bear is the fact that it was undeserved. It came upon him because he preached the Word of God. He complains, “*The word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long*” (20:8, NIV).

And when the predicted calamity was slow in coming, men taunted him and said, “*Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!*” (17:15). They called him a madman, a delusional psychotic. And even after his predictions began to be fulfilled, they still accused him of being a madman who made himself out to be a prophet (29:26,27).

Still, Jeremiah continued to preach his message, especially against the nation's religious leaders who were leading the people astray. In chapter 26, as he called the people to repentance again, a mob seized him under the leadership of the priests and prophets and called for his death. The government officials heard of the uproar and came to see what was happening. The priests and prophets insisted that Jeremiah be put to death because he prophesied against Jerusalem and the temple. When Jeremiah defended his message by claiming that it came from the Lord Himself and that he preached out of a deep concern and love for the city, the officials agreed that Jeremiah had done nothing worthy of death. This was confirmed when certain elders reminded the people that Micah had prophesied virtually the same message 100 years earlier and King Hezekiah had not sentenced Micah to death.

The fickle mob was swayed by this argument and protected Jeremiah from the wrath of the religious leaders, whereupon he was released unharmed.

Another prophet, Uriah of Kiriath Jearim, was not as lucky, however, as we read in 26:20–23. Uriah preached virtually the same message as Jeremiah and was pursued to Egypt by Jehoiakim's men, arrested, brought back to Jerusalem and executed.

Throughout Jehoiakim's reign, Jeremiah suffered arrest, humiliation, torture, and threats. For forty years, he was heartbroken to see the people refuse to heed his message. It is not that Judah was an irreligious people. Rather the opposite was true. The people were proud of their temple. They were certain that Jerusalem could not fall to their enemies because the temple was there. They listened eagerly to prophets who proclaimed messages of peace and prosperity, of God's love and favor. But Jeremiah they persecuted and rejected.

Jeremiah must have been tempted to give up his prophetic ministry. The betrayal of his family, the rejection of his countrymen, the hatred of the priests and the prophets, the animosity of the princes, all must have been a constant source of discouragement to him.

Like Martin Luther, he must have often asked himself, "Are you alone wise?" When so many men and such great men are opposed to him, he must have had doubts and discouragement. When he saw how all his words fell to the ground and nothing seemed to be accomplished by all his preaching, it is indeed an amazing thing that he did not simply throw up his hands and say, "What's the use?"¹³⁰

Why did Jeremiah continue?¹³¹

1. From the very beginning of his ministry, he had known that his message would meet with resistance (1:18,19).
2. At the same time, God had promised him that He would be with him: "*I am with you and will rescue you, declares the LORD*" (1:19, NIV). Years later, He reaf-

firmed this promise: *“Surely I will deliver you for a good purpose . . . I am with you to rescue and save you,”* (15:11,20, NIV). God’s presence and His promise to never to leave or forsake His people is a source of encouragement and strength to them in the midst of their persecution and rejection. They know that they are not forgotten.

3. Jeremiah was convinced that he was preaching the words of God. From the very beginning of his ministry, he receives the command: *“You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you”* (1:7). Jeremiah refers to his message as the word of the Lord (1:4,11,13; 7:1; 9:20; 10:1; 11:1; 14:1–17; 16:1; 17:20; 18:1,5; 19:3; 21:11; 25:3; 27:1; 28:12; etc.). And like the other prophets, he often introduces his messages with the phrases *“Thus says the LORD,”* or *“The LORD said”* (1:14; 2:5,19,22; 3:1,6,10,12,14; 4:3,9,27; 6:9; etc.). He knew that when the people rejected his message and ministry, ultimately they were not rejecting him, but God.
4. Jeremiah was driven by an intense love for his people. He knew destruction was coming. He weeps for them (9:1; 13:17; 14:17; Lamentations 2:11; 3:48) and prays for them (14:17–22). He says in 17:16 that despite their rejection, *“I have not run away from being your shepherd; you know I have not desired the day of despair.”*

Despite rejection, persecution, and humiliation, Jeremiah continued to faithfully serve God for forty years. May it be said of each of us that we, too, would follow our God with such dedication and passion. When we, like Jeremiah, are tempted to avoid the cost of following God, may we be reminded of his words, *“If I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’ His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot”* (20:9, NIV).

Daniel

The book of Daniel provides both a theological explanation and a practical example concerning the call to suffering that those who follow God are often asked to accept, as the purposes of God unfold throughout history.

From the first chapter, Daniel and his three friends were faced with a choice: would they compromise their convictions and adopt the practices of the royal court, or would they remain true to the faith of their parents and the Law of God?

This decision was not one made without consideration of the tremendous consequences: they were risking their lives and those of others for the sake of their convictions based on divine mandate. They were determined, however, not to defile themselves with the king’s food. When the young men were allowed to put their

convictions to the test and not only survived but thrived, they saw, for the first time, that God is faithful to those who remain faithful to His covenant. It was not the last time that their faith would be tested, however.

Sometime later, these same three friends refused to compromise their faith by bowing before the gold statue of the king of Babylon. They knew that there would be dire consequences for their obedience to God. In Daniel 3:13–15 we read,

Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up?

“Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?” (NIV)

Listen to these men’s wonderful answer:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king.” (3:16,17, NIV)

They knew God was able to deliver them. They had experienced it before. They also knew that He had not promised to deliver them, for we read in the following verse:

“But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (3:18, NIV)

These young men did not know what God would do. They were aware of the fact that just because God is able to do something, it does not mean that He *will* do it. But they knew that they would trust Him and follow Him regardless of the consequences. Obedience is not preconditioned on an assurance of deliverance.

Tests like this continued for Daniel and his colleagues. When, as an old man, Daniel was faced with the decision of whether he would obey a new law forbidding him from praying to his God, he refused to obey it, knowing full well the consequences. When he was thrown into the lion’s den, he knew why it was happening.

He knew that God was able to save His people. But he also knew that the best of God’s people *“will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered”* (11:33, NIV).

In some of the more difficult passages of his book, Daniel records a number of visions that God gives him concerning the future. Ton provides a helpful summary and points out two thoughts that are prominent in Daniel's view of history:¹³²

1. God is sovereign over the universe and history. He will fulfill His purposes with His children, even *through* the calamities that they may face along the way.
2. God shares his authority with man. He entrusts man with rule over His creation (Genesis 1:28) but certain individuals (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar) are entrusted with rule over nations (2:37,38). Yet that authority can be removed when an individual does not recognize the sovereignty of God. God's purpose is to find people who are capable of handling authority and to whom, in the end, He can entrust the responsibilities of ruling over His creation, not merely for a test run but for all eternity. In Daniel 7:13,14, we find one like "a son of man" given this authority, which Jesus applied to Himself in Matthew 26:67. But immediately afterward (verses 18,21,22,27) we read that the kingdoms will also be given to "the saints of the Most High God." These rulers will do two basic things: they will worship Him and obey Him (verse 28). Their rule will be exercised under His rule.

Before that happens, however, they will suffer greatly. They will be oppressed (7:25). The Anointed One, under whose authority they will rule, will be cut off and have nothing (9:26). Holy places will be desecrated and the people of God will have to face the same decisions that Daniel and his friends faced (11:31,32).

Ton points out that Daniel 11:32–35 is the key to the entire book, explaining both what will happen to the people of God and why it will happen:

With flattery he will corrupt those who have violated the covenant, but the people who know their God will firmly resist him. Those who are wise will instruct many, though for a time they will fall by the sword or be burned or captured or plundered. When they fall, they will receive a little help, and many who are not sincere will join them. Some of the wise will stumble, so that they may be refined, purified and made spotless until the time of the end, for it will still come at the appointed time. (NIV)

Those who are wise are those who know God; they know His plans and His ways. They instruct others and remain faithful even at the cost of their own lives.

Ton makes mention of the fact in 11:34 that there will be some who will join the people of God who are not sincere: "there are those among them who will merely play the hero for a while."¹³³ The opposition will cause some of the wise to stagger or stumble. The hostility will be real and it will be severe.

But it will refine and purify them. As the final purpose of God is to confer upon man the position of ruler over all of creation, the test of faithfulness determines whether the person will remain under God's supreme authority. Will he obey when things are tough and the promise seems far away? If he endures, the last verse of Daniel promises that, at the end of the days, the one who is faithful will receive his allotted place or inheritance (12:13). Persecution tests the worthiness of those who will reign with the Anointed One; it shows that they are prepared to acknowledge His sovereignty over their lives. Their perseverance reveals the reality of their trust in Him, as everything else is stripped away.

What kind of people is God looking to entrust with rule over the nations in the end? Ton does a fine job of summarizing Daniel's teaching on this:¹³⁴

1. Men and women who have made the fundamental decision that they will obey their God absolutely; they will live according to His laws whatever cost they may have to pay.
2. Men and women who, when confronted by trials, persecutions, and the threat of death, prove to be faithful, persevering through all difficulties, tortures, and even martyrdom.
3. Men and women who are passionate to proclaim the sovereign rule of God and to acknowledge Him in everything, always giving Him all the praise and glory, without ever attributing any merit to themselves.
4. Men and women who are continually immersed in the task of telling others about their God, leading others to Him and showing others the way of righteousness.
5. Men and women who have a clear understanding of history knowing that the loss of temporary goods and even life itself for God's sake is in reality not a loss but a gain. Instead of instant satisfaction here and now, they look forward to their true fulfillment in eternity.

CHAPTER

The Revelation of God in Christ

GOD AS SUFFERER

On April 5, 1943, a young Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer was arrested by the German Gestapo along with two of his friends for being involved in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Nine months before his execution in Flossenburg on April 9, 1945, Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to a friend in which he made an interesting observation concerning suffering and the presence of God in the world: “Only the suffering God can help.”¹

John Stott recounts the story of how, in another part of Germany during the same period, a group of learned Jews in the Buchenwald concentration camp decided one Sunday afternoon to put God on trial for neglecting His chosen people.² Witnesses were produced for both the prosecution and the defense. Rabbis served as the judges. Though both sides were represented, the case for the prosecution was overwhelming. The judges, therefore, found the accused guilty and proceeded to solemnly condemn Him.

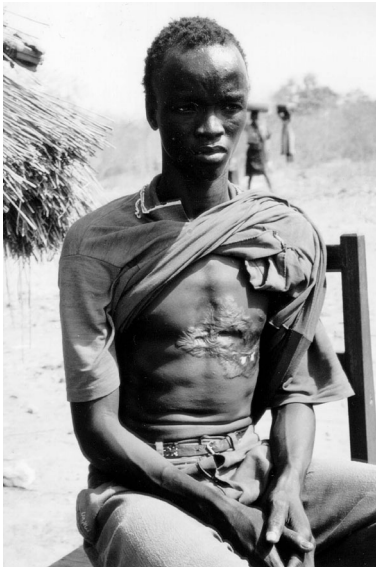
Given the circumstances, the trial and the verdict, though unfortunate, are understandable. The horrors of Nazi Germany, the death camps, the gas chambers, the destruction of lives, and the seeming silence of God in the face of such brutality and injustice shook the faith of many.³ There is tremendous evil in our world, tremendous suffering and injustice. Nazi Germany illustrated that vividly for us in the mid-twentieth century. The Khmer Rouge under the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia did the same in the 1970s. The atrocities committed by the governments of Sudan and the former Yugoslavia provided a chilling reminder in the 1990s of mankind’s depravity.

Christianity has not been alone in seeking to understand the question of suffering. Every major religious system in the world has wrestled with the issue to some

degree. Only Christianity, however, has developed an understanding that refuses to retreat from reality, while upholding the dignity of God. Unlike Buddhism, Gnosticism, and Christian Science, we acknowledge the reality of suffering, even if we do not always grasp all the reasons for it. We recognize that suffering cannot be explained by one singular answer that fits all situations. That is not to say that we do not try to understand it or that we always come up with the right answers. Neither do we say that the search for meaning is fruitless or a violation of divine privilege. But Christians do readily admit that suffering is real.

Indeed, the history of the Christian faith has been a history of persecution and suffering. From its very beginning, the followers of Jesus have suffered at the hands of torturers whose tactics were at least the equals of the barbarism of the Nazis. Such historical classics as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*⁴ and *Martyrs Mirror*⁵ are replete with examples. We need not even go that far afield, however. The widespread and brutal persecution and abuse of Christians is true even to the present day in many parts of the world.⁶

For many Christians, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of suffering is the concept that some may have of a God who seems rather indifferent to our pain or to the persecution of His people. A number of years ago, I was representing The Voice of the Martyrs at a large conference. As part of our display area were the pictures and testimonies of a number of Christians who had been tortured for their faith and yet had persevered by God's grace. One of the stories was about a young Sudanese man named Philip.



Philip had been captured by Islamists loyal to the government of Sudan, who tried to force him to convert to Islam. As a Christian, Philip refused. In order to compel him to change his mind, the soldiers held burning sticks to his chest, while others held him down. Philip was sure that he would be killed, but he determined that he would rather die than deny his Lord. Miraculously, he survived, and his life is a testimony to the power of God in the midst of persecution.

At one point in the conference, a middle-aged woman came to our display. Busy with others, I nevertheless kept her in the corner of my eye in case she had questions that I might be able to answer. As she was reading Philip's story, I could not help noticing that she began to shake her head

in disbelief. As I walked toward her, I could hear her muttering to herself, “I don’t understand. I just don’t understand.” Drawing up beside her, I cautiously inquired, “Excuse me, ma’am. What is it that you don’t understand?” Looking at me with wide eyes, she pointed to the picture of Philip and blurted, “I don’t understand how God could forsake His people like that!”

She is not alone in feeling this way, though I disagree with her conclusion. In the midst of seemingly unending travail, how easy it is to picture a God who is far removed from our suffering, seated on a heavenly throne, isolated and insulated from the world. A God who has never suffered and who is immune to pain. A God who has never really walked in our shoes and faced what we have to face. A God who, in the words of John Stott, is “lounging, perhaps dozing, in some celestial deck-chair, while hungry millions starve to death. We think of him as an armchair spectator, almost gloating over the world’s suffering and enjoying his own isolation.”⁷ We wonder how interested He really is in what goes on down here. As we look at the horrible persecution being faced around the world, the thousands who die, the tens of thousands imprisoned, impoverished, orphaned, widowed, just because of their Christian faith, we wonder . . .

Does He not see? Does He not hear? Where is God in our darkest moment? Where is He when the Sudanese child is ripped from the arms of her mother? Where is He when His children are subjected to excruciating electrical shocks applied to their private parts? Where is He when Christian pastors are forced to eat their own excrement and drink their own urine in a perverse parody of Communion? Where is God when church leaders are doused with gasoline and set on fire? Where is He when an eight-year-old girl watches her father die before her eyes, shot in the back by a thug who demanded that he desecrate his Bible?

What is hard to comprehend in the midst of suffering is not the misfortune itself, or even the pain or injustice of it. The real sting of suffering is the apparent “Godforsakenness” of it. We cry out yet it appears that God does not seem to care. The silence of heaven haunts us, when God seems either unable or unwilling to do anything about our afflictions.

What is the solution? What did Bonhoeffer mean when he said, “Only the suffering God can help”? Is it possible that part of our solution to the questions of suffering and persecution lies in seeing God as a God who suffers too?

Of course, first of all, we must ask ourselves whether this is a correct (or even a partially correct) concept of God. It is the intent of this section to discover an answer to this question. Is God impassible (incapable of suffering), or can (does) He indeed know pain? Is the concept of a suffering God a biblical one? If so, in what way is it demonstrated in Scripture?

These are essential questions. We are not free to think of God any way that we like, but only to the extent that He has revealed Himself to be. Only God can reveal God.⁸ To believe and to do otherwise is to fall into the sin of creating a God made after our own image, which is idolatry.

The question that we must therefore answer in this section is: “What has God revealed about Himself in the area of passibility?”

The Doctrine of Impassibility

The question of whether God can actually suffer has traditionally been dealt with in what has been called the doctrine of impassibility: “the doctrine that God is not capable of being acted upon or affected emotionally by anything in creation.”⁹ The term comes from the Latin adjective *impassibilis* meaning ‘incapable of suffering’ and therefore ‘devoid of emotion.’¹⁰ The equivalent Greek term *apathes* was used by the Greek philosophers to describe God as one who was above pleasure and pain.¹¹ Such emotions that would involve change were seen to be incompatible with the perfect, unchanging character and tranquility of deity. This view, as time went on, was accepted quite uncritically by the early Greek church fathers, and in consequence, as Stott rightfully says, their teaching about God sometimes sounds more Greek than Hebrew.¹² They relegated all Old Testament descriptions of the love, jealousy, anger, sorrow, and pity of God to the realm of anthropomorphisms that could not be taken literally, because they believed the divine nature is unmoved by all emotions.¹³ The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) declared the idea that the divine nature could suffer as “vain babblings,” and condemned those who believed it.

While the church fathers recognized that Christ, the incarnate Son of God, had suffered, they contended that God Himself did not; He was impassible, or as Article One of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England affirms, God is “without body, parts or passions.” The Westminster Confession of Faith explicitly asserted that God is “without body, parts, or passions, immutable.”

Historically, this position of impassibility has been predominant in Christian thought. Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Anselm, Aquinas, Calvin, Arminius, and Wesley all supported this doctrine.

Predominance does not mean universality, however. Throughout church history there have been those who have questioned whether this was a biblical way to view God.¹⁴ In the twentieth century especially, there has been a general turning away from the traditional view of impassibility with a growing number of respected Bible scholars, theologians, and Christian philosophers arguing most strenuously for divine passibility or, at the very least, for a redefinition of impassibility.¹⁵ I would tend to argue for the latter.

In all fairness, the intent of the early church fathers was essentially correct. As Stott explains, “They were wanting above all to safeguard the truths that God is perfect (so that nothing can add to or subtract from him) and that God is changeless (so nothing can disturb him).”¹⁶ These beliefs are essential to a biblical view of God. What is really needed, therefore, is a redefining or reclarifying of what divine impassibility does and does not mean.

There is often a fear that ascribing suffering to God would ascribe to Him an attribute that would be inconsistent with His omnipotence and immutability. To some, a suffering God implies a weak and frustrated Deity. This need not be the case. Ohlrich correctly points out that “many objections to passibility would be dispelled if we would keep in mind that God *chooses* to suffer; the God of suffering does not passively endure pain, but actively chooses to embrace it.”¹⁷ As Dennis Ngien writes, “Our Christian foreparents were right to speak of God as impassible if that means God is not emotionally unstable and cannot be manipulated by humans. But they were wrong to conclude from this that God has no passion.”¹⁸

If impassibility is properly understood to mean that God cannot be forced against His will from either inside or outside influences and that He is never the helpless victim of circumstances, actions, or emotions, then this is obviously in line with the revelation of God given in Scripture. *God cannot be unconsciously or unwillingly moved.* God suffers because He chooses to love.¹⁹

We must hasten to add as well that impassibility means that God can never be forced to act contrary to His character and other revealed attributes.²⁰ As William Temple put it, “There is a highly technical sense in which God, as Christ revealed him, is ‘without passions’; for he is Creator and supreme, and is never ‘passive’ in the sense of having things happen to him except from his consent; also he is constant, and free from the gusts of feeling carrying him this way and that.”²¹ However, if what is meant by impassibility is “incapable of suffering,” then, Temple asserts, “in this sense its prediction of God is almost wholly false.”²²

Impassibility in such a sense is incompatible with the testimony of Scripture, as we shall see later in this study. It is completely in line with Scripture to say, as Lewis does, that just as God “perfectly uses his intellectual and volitional powers, he perfectly uses his emotional powers God is not overcome by emotions, has no emotions out of control, out of balance, or inappropriate Affirmatively, the God of the Bible has appropriate, healthy, self-controlled emotional experience.”²³

A biblical view of divine impassibility, rather than contradicting God’s immutability, affirms that God—in all that He thinks, speaks, and does—moves in a way consistent with His attributes and purposes. In addition, it affirms that God is not only transcendent, but also profoundly imminent. Although free from unworthy and

uncontrolled emotions and immune from being unconsciously or unwillingly moved, God is compassionately able to relate with those who suffer pain in all of its aspects.

We affirm, therefore, that God is unchangeable and sovereign. Yet we are able to do so without falling into the trap of having a God who is so much like us that we cannot trust Him but, on the other hand, is so unlike us that He cannot truly be in a living, loving relationship with His people.

Anthropomorphic Metaphors

The issue of anthropomorphic metaphors is one that must be addressed when considering whether God can suffer in the way that we have alluded to.

What are anthropomorphic metaphors? Simply put, they are the figures of speech that are used in Scripture to describe God experiencing human-like emotions, such as anger, sadness, grief, and joy. The question that we must answer is, does God experience these emotions in exactly the same way as we do? Or is the Bible merely referring to God in a way that is comprehensible to us?

It must be admitted that God is, in many ways, indescribable in the sense that any language we use of Him is insufficient. Likewise, we must admit that when the Bible refers to God experiencing human emotions, it is generally speaking anthropomorphically, “speaking of God in language drawn from the human sphere.”²⁴ Yet to say that God’s feelings are not human is not to say that they are not real. As John Stott wrote, “If they are only metaphysical, then the only God left to us will be the infinite iceberg of metaphysics.”²⁵

G. R. Lewis makes a valid observation when he says that “all of these anthropomorphic expressions (concerning God’s emotions) are figurative, but the figures of speech illustrate a nonfigurative point.”²⁶ Fretheim agrees: “The metaphors do reveal an essential continuity with the reality which is God... The metaphors are ‘reality depicting.’”²⁷

As such, we may say that anthropomorphisms can, in fact, truly describe God; they contain accurate, though not exhaustive, information about God. They can be descriptive, without being fully descriptive, for God cannot finally be limited to any of our descriptions. Yet, the information they are intended to convey is true and must be taken seriously. As Francis Schaeffer was wont to point out, that which God has revealed about Himself is not only true for us but for Him.²⁸ Truth does not have to be exhaustive in order to be true. We do not need to know everything, or have the ability to know everything, in order to know something that is true about God.²⁹ But if we believe in the God of the Bible, then we must believe that whatever

God has revealed about Himself is true and it is that knowledge of God for which we are responsible.

Thus, if God has revealed Himself to be one who suffers, we must not automatically assume that just because God is speaking in such a way that we can understand, therefore it must of necessity be unreal. Such a tendency, Fretheim points out, makes God so wholly other “as to make relationship, let alone knowledge, impossible.”³⁰

Indeed, if God is omnipotent, as the Bible asserts, it is reasonable to assume that God would not lack the ability to communicate aspects of His character to finite man truthfully in an understandable way. If the desire to communicate truth is there, surely there is the ability on God’s part both to do so and to assure its reception.

Therefore, in light of the doctrine of divine impassibility and anthropomorphic metaphors, the answer to the question, “Could God suffer?” would seem to be that it is quite possible for us to speak of a God who can suffer. In fact, it may be quite beneficial for us to do so.

This is a long way from saying, however, that God *does* suffer. We have allowed for the possibility. We must now look to God’s revelation in His Son and in Scripture to see if God does indeed suffer and if so, how.

Suffering Incarnationally

Charles Ohlrich is probably correct when he writes in his excellent little book, *The Suffering God*, “The most disturbing and most provocative teaching in all of the Bible is that Jesus Christ, the son of a simple carpenter from the town of Nazareth, was in reality God in human flesh.”³¹

The New Testament Christians were convinced that God Himself had visited this world and redeemed it in Jesus Christ. The gap between God and man had been bridged. The hope pointed to in the Old Testament found fulfillment in the person of Jesus. To use another imagery, God’s song of redemption and restoration of mankind—whose early notes sounded in Genesis—increased in volume in Isaiah, repeated in Daniel and the other prophets, and rose to a climax in the revelation of Jesus.

God had revealed Himself to man through His Son.

What Kind of God is He?

In Isaiah 40:18 the prophet had asked, “*To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare Him to?*” Every religion in the world is, in a sense, an attempt to answer this question, as men aspire to describe their idea of Deity.

To the Israelites, Isaiah's question was rhetorical. There simply is no one to whom God can be compared, no image (mental or physical) that will adequately reflect His being. Any image is inevitably misleading.

With the revelation of Jesus, this abruptly changed. Suddenly God supplied His own image. The question "To whom will you compare God?" suddenly had an answer: Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15, Jesus is referred to as the image or icon (εικων) of God. It is this word that was used to describe an idol or an image.³² Jesus is the representation that God has chosen to reveal Himself to man. In more explicit terms, the author of Hebrews 1:2,3 writes that Jesus is the "exact imprint" (carakth̄r) of God's nature and the radiance of God's glory.³³ The force of carakth̄r (from which we get the word "character") is that of a "representation that is an exact reproduction of a particular form or structure."³⁴

Those who want to know what God is like can see Him in the person of Jesus. But what do people see when they look at Jesus? What kind of God does He reveal?

In Isaiah 53 we read, "*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. . . Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows*" (Isaiah 53:3,4, NIV).

While Isaiah 53 primarily emphasizes the sacrificial work of the suffering Servant on behalf of mankind's sin, Matthew quotes these verses in reference to Jesus' ministry *before* He goes to the cross. In Matthew's mind, the prophecy of Isaiah 53:3,4 was fulfilled in Jesus' incarnation rather than the atonement.

Specifically, Matthew 8:17 records that as a result of the healing ministry of Jesus (verses 1–16), the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4 was fulfilled: "*He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases*" (NIV).

In other words, by coming and living among us, Jesus took on all aspects of what it meant to live in a fallen world. As He saw the suffering of people, His sympathy was so intense that He actually felt their pain and weaknesses. He saw the burdens that many carried, and He stepped under the load with us and helped carry it.

By coming to earth, He entered into the very conditions that we find here, including sorrow, sickness, and suffering. Experiencing sickness and sorrow Himself, and sympathizing as He did with human suffering, He was moved to alleviate the miseries of this life when He witnessed them.³⁵ Time and time again we see throughout the Gospels that Jesus healed because He pitied.³⁶ By means of His deep sympathy or compassion, Jesus entered "fully and personally into the sorrows of those whom He came to rescue."³⁷ As Bredin puts it, "He enters into the fears and pain, the tears and the worries and the anxieties of people in order to transform them."³⁸

When God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, He experienced in full measure the physical suffering that goes along with being a human being in a fallen world. In the incarnation, He was a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering (Isaiah 53:3). He hungered (Matthew 4:2). He experienced thirst (John 19:28). He grew tired (John 4:6; Luke 8:23,24). As the writer to the Hebrews points out, He understood and sympathized with the suffering of mankind having experienced suffering Himself. This is the kind of God we serve. Pontius Pilate said more than he realized when he pointed to the beaten and bloodied Jesus and declared, “Behold your king” (John 15:14).

Is Healing in the Atonement?

There are two New Testament passages that are often seen to be directly quoting Isaiah 53:4. The most obvious quote is Matthew 8:17 but in Matthew’s context, as we shall see below, the issue seems to be the incarnation rather than the atonement. Many assume that 1 Peter 2:24 also quotes Isaiah 53:4, but as Erickson points out, this assumption is not as clear as some would believe.³⁹ Peter gives none of the typical indications that he is quoting an Old Testament passage. We do not find the words “as it is written” or any other similar formula or phrase. Rather, it seems likelier that he is referring to the whole of Isaiah 53, and particularly to verse 12.⁴⁰ How, then, are we to understand how Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53:4? An in-depth investigation becomes essential at this point.

Isaiah 53:4 reads, “Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried” (NASB). The primary meaning of the first noun, “griefs” חֵלָה (chale), is that of “physical sickness” or “disease,”⁴¹ though the term can also mean spiritual sickness, as in Isaiah 1:5 and Hosea 5:13.⁴² As the NASB translation reflects, the word is placed in the emphatic position in the sentence. The verb אָנָּח (nasa’) has basically three separate meanings: “to lift up”; “to bear, carry, support”; “to take, take away,”⁴³ though the predominant meaning is “to lift (up).”⁴⁴ Many interpreters take אָנָּח in this context as meaning to “to bear” or “to carry” vicariously⁴⁵ and, indeed, this term can refer to vicarious bearing.⁴⁶ Erickson argues, however, that in the one hundred verses listed by Brown, Driver, and Biggs in which the meaning is “to bear, carry,” “only six have reference to a vicarious bearing of guilt.”⁴⁷ Erickson contends that the more likely rendering in Isaiah 53:4 is “has taken.”⁴⁸ The verb itself does not mean “to bear the punishment of,” as Stott points out. “We are obliged to translate it thus only when sin is its object.”⁴⁹ Erickson adds: “It should also be noted that Isaiah did not put the verb in an emphatic position; it seems that what is really important is what the suffering servant has taken, not how he has taken it”⁵⁰ (emphasis added).

The second noun in this passage, בְּאִכְוֶה (mak’ov), appears only sixteen times in the entire Old Testament, in which at least eleven occurrences refer to mental suffering.⁵¹ Gesenius calls it “pain of soul.”⁵² Erickson says, “The basic idea conveyed by the word is

mental pain, sorrow, or distress resulting from the toilsomeness of life, including its physical burdens."⁵³ The likeliest meaning here, then, would seem to be that which the *New American Standard* and *New International Version* have adopted: "sorrows" or perhaps distress, perhaps as a result of physical infirmities.⁵⁴ The second verb, **lkꝰ** (*sabal*), means basically "to carry a heavy load."⁵⁵ The word appears nine times in the Old Testament. Lamentations 5:7 and Isaiah 53:11 in particular convey the idea of vicarious bearing. In the remaining instances, **lkꝰ** merely means "'carrying a load'; there is no connotation of vicariousness."⁵⁶ While the verb in Isaiah 53:4 may hold the concept of vicarious bearing, as some believe,⁵⁷ there is no reason to demand that it must. As Erickson points out, "Here again, just as in the first clause, the emphasis is on what the suffering servant has carried rather than on how he has carried it."⁵⁸

It must be admitted that there are various ways in which this verse may be taken. It does seem that Isaiah in 53:4 is speaking of actual physical and mental afflictions, though not necessarily to a vicarious bearing of them, and as Erickson states, "in Matthew's quotation of this passage, we find something very similar."⁵⁹ Matthew's rendering of Isaiah 53:4 is quite unusual because it follows neither the LXX or Targum, both of which spiritualize the Hebrew.⁶⁰ Carson holds that Matthew 8:17 is most likely Matthew's own translation of Isaiah 53:4, given the significant alterations from either the LXX or the Targum.⁶¹ One significant difference between the LXX (which Matthew often quotes in his Gospel) and his quotation of Isaiah is in his substitution of verbs in the first phrase of Isaiah's passage. In the LXX, the phrase used the verb **ferw** (*phero*), which could conceivably be translated as "bearing vicariously." Matthew, however, substitutes **lambanw** (*lambano*) for **ferw**, a word nowhere used in connection with vicarious bearing of guilt or anything similar.⁶² **Lambanw** is merely an extraordinarily common word with little or no theological significance. In Matthew 8:17, it simply means "to take away" or "remove."⁶³

The second verb **bastazw** (*bastazo*) is very close in meaning to **lkꝰ** (*sabal*), meaning "to bear" or "to carry" but "in none of its usages does it signify 'to bear vicariously.'"⁶⁴ Perhaps what it meant here is a sympathetic bearing such as we find in Galatians 6:2.⁶⁵ Robertson writes, "The passage as Mt. employs it, has no bearing on the doctrine of the atonement."⁶⁶ But, he adds, "Jesus does show his sympathy with us. Christ's sympathy with the sufferers was so intense that he really felt their weaknesses and pains. In our burdens Jesus steps under the load with us and helps us carry on."⁶⁷ Erickson concurs: "What we are suggesting here, then, is that both Matthew and Isaiah are referring to actual physical sicknesses and mental distresses rather than sins."⁶⁸ Erickson continues, "It seems likelier that they are referring to a sympathetic bearing of the troubles of this life. If this is the proper interpretation, Jesus 'took our infirmities and bore our diseases' by becoming incarnate rather than by offering atonement."⁶⁹

R. T. France notes that for Matthew, it is important that Jesus be seen to fulfill the role of the Isaianic Servant of the Lord.⁷⁰ Yet, as France points out, "it is remarkable that neither of these passages (Matthew 8:17 or Isaiah 53:4) refers to the distinctive role of redemptive suffering, either in the specific words cited or in the aspect of Jesus' ministry to

which they are applied.”⁷¹ “It is in the totality of his life and ministry, not only in its redemptive aspect, that Matthew delights to trace Jesus’ fulfillment of the scriptural pattern.”⁷²

We conclude by noting that this explanation of how Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled answers the chronological difficulties of how the effects of the atonement could actually be said to be in effect before the atonement was even accomplished. If the atonement were in view in Matthew 8:17, it is hard to explain why Matthew quotes this verse in a context sometime before Christ’s actual death. If, however, it is the incarnation that is in view here (and in Isaiah 53:4), and not the atonement, then there is no chronological difficulty at all. This view also best fits the context and syntax of each passage. We conclude, therefore, that the emphasis of Matthew 8:17 and Isaiah 53:4 is the incarnation rather than the atonement.

Could Jesus Have Gotten Sick?

I remember the first time I ever wrote down words to the effect that Jesus experienced sickness. There was a part of me that resisted the idea. Yet, if we take the incarnation seriously, as we have just done, we have little choice but to come to this conclusion and ask the question, “Why not?” If Jesus suffered the other consequences of living in a fallen world, why draw the line at illness? Why the distinction? Is there anything particularly sinful about sickness? Is not sickness and disease, like all other pain and suffering, a result of the Fall, the consequences of which will only be finally eradicated at the second coming of Christ?⁷³ If we argue that Jesus could never have been sick, we are hard put to explain why He experienced in full all the other effects of living in a fallen world but not that all-too-common one. We must be careful not to confuse sin with its consequences.

In Christ, God suffered the anguish of facing the prospect of torture, suffering, and death. We really must take the events at the Garden of Gethsemane seriously, where we see Jesus recoiling from the horror of the cross. Mark puts it most bluntly: “He was seized by horror and distress” (14:33, literal translation). The events facing Him in the hours to come cause Him to feel intensely the pull to walk away from what He knows He has been called to do.

He did not desire it, nor was it His idea. He has been *sent* by the Father.⁷⁴ The cross was not the Son’s initiative but the Father’s. The Son goes to the cross out of raw obedience. But in the garden, He prays with loud crying and tears, in anguished suffering. Three times He prays, “Father, please don’t make me do this,” but concludes with, “I’ll do what You want me to do.” When the author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus learning obedience from what He suffered, it is to this event that he was referring (Hebrews 5:7,8). Jesus goes to the cross simply because it was the Father’s will.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23 and 2:2 that the central theme of his message is Christ and Him crucified. The Gospels move unapologetically toward the climax of the cross. The cross was central to the incarnation. When you see Jesus on the cross, you see the perfect picture of what God is like. In Christ crucified, you see God unveiled. Ngien states: “The crucified Jesus is the only accurate picture of God the world has ever seen.”⁷⁵

And on the cross, He cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—a cry expressing the profound sense of divine forsakenness that the psalmist felt in Psalm 22. Yet, by praying, He shows that He knows He is not truly or finally abandoned by God. He also knows that His Father will not intervene in His behalf to either save Him or alleviate His suffering. He struggles with the temptation of turning from the path to which God has predestined Him in order to accomplish His purposes. Deserted by His disciples, forsaken by the fickle crowds, He dies abandoned by all and assisted by none. When Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus’ cross, he did not do so out of pity but because he was forced to. The soldiers cared nothing for their victim, except that He had a nice garment that they claimed as booty. He was taunted and ridiculed by commoner and priest alike (Mark 15:29–32).

But it is the horror of His Father’s nonintervention that causes Jesus to cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The sinless Son of God becomes a curse for us, as the falling darkness poignantly demonstrates just as it did when the curse of God rested on the land of Egypt during the first Passover (Exodus 10:21,22; Mark 15:33).⁷⁶

So when a skeptic claims that God has no answer to suffering because He has never known suffering, the Christian recognizes just how foolish such an assertion is. In the incarnation, God experienced physical and emotional suffering to the fullest. God Himself lived among us, sympathized with us, suffered with us, suffered for us, and eventually, died for us. In the words of the great hymn by Charles Wesley, “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?”⁷⁷

Ohlrich recounts a story from Graham Greene’s novel *A Burnt-Out Case*, in which a character named Doctor Colin works among the severely afflicted people at a leper colony run by Catholic priests and nuns. Doctor Colin, however, is a confessed atheist. At the end of the novel, there is an incident in which Colin stands with the Father Superior, observing the appalling suffering and the grotesque mutilations of the numerous patients. Turning to the Father, Colin suggests that God must be pained as He looks at the suffering of the world. The Father replies, “When you were a boy, they can’t have taught you theology very well. God cannot feel disappointment or pain,” to which Colin replies, “Perhaps that’s why I don’t care to believe in Him.”⁷⁸

Stott poses the question, “In the real world of pain, how can one worship a God who is immune to it?”⁷⁹ To illustrate his case, he tells of his visits to various Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and of standing before the statue of Buddha with its crossed legs, folded arms, closed eyes, the ghost of a smile playing on the lips and a remote look on its face, detached from the pain and suffering all around it. Stott writes that each time he has been in such a situation, eventually he found himself having to turn away. He writes, “And in my imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wretched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged into God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me!”⁸⁰ For Stott, any thought of a far-away, uncaring God, isolated and insulated from pain, is smashed by the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In Christ, God “laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us.”⁸¹

The words of Archbishop William Temple fittingly conclude this section:

When Reason says, “It is God who made all the world: He is therefore responsible; it is He who should suffer,” we answer, “Yes, of course; He does suffer; look at the cross!” And when Reason cries, “If God were the loving God of whom you speak, He would not endure the misery of His children, His heart would break”; we answer, “Yes, of course; it does break; look at the cross!” And when Reason exclaims, “God is infinite and ineffable; it is blasphemy to say we know Him; we cannot know Him”: we answer, “No, not perfectly; but enough to love Him; look at the cross!”⁸²

Suffering Relationally

A study of Scripture shows that God’s suffering goes beyond the experience of the incarnation. The Old Testament is replete with examples of how God’s interaction with mankind caused Him pain.⁸³ God’s refusal to seclude Himself from His creation and His desire to enter into relationship with mankind make Him a willing recipient of the pain that inevitably arises out of the interaction and the colliding of interests of partners.⁸⁴

Gerstenberger and Schrage note:

God does not seclude himself in a “hereafter” or other remote place, whether in heaven or in holy places. Certainly there are also these conceptions of the “remote” God (cf. 1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 2:4). But wherever he may “dwell,” he comes to the rebellious, zealous or suffering men of his choice (Gen. 11:5; 18:21; Exod. 25:8; 2 Sam. 5:24; Ps. 12:5). He wills to be with men in bad times as well as good

(Exod. 3:7,8; 33:14,15; Num. 10:35,36). Even the most sophisticated theologians of the Old Testament, who would have preferred to make Yahweh unapproachable and unreachable, still let him be present in the theatre of human history in the form of words (Deut. 30:11–14), of an angel (Exod. 23:20–23), of a pillar of fire and cloud (Lev. 9:23,24; Exod. 13:21), in the storm (Job 38:1), or in an earthquake (Ps. 68:7,8). The nearness of God is the real concern of the Old Testament; his loftiness and exaltation are actualized in his nearness to man. Consequently, God even participates in the misery of man. His pain for the world is never the wailing sympathy of an uninvolved onlooker, but the genuine pain of one who is directly affected, the suffering of a comrade, who takes upon himself a part of the burden.⁸⁵

In Genesis 6:6, we are told that when God saw the wickedness of mankind, He was sorry that He made man and was “grieved in His heart.” Psalm 78:40,41 speaks of how, time and again, God’s people grieved and pained God! In Hosea 11:8, after announcing judgment upon Israel and Ephraim, God cries out, “*How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart is turned over within Me, all my compassions are kindled*” (NASB). The prospect of judgment is not a thing of joy to God. Though the people deserve judgment, God still loves them. The very people with whom He is angry are those whom He loves. Kitamori states: “So the ‘pain’ of God reflects His will to love the object of His wrath.”⁸⁶ God announces in Hosea 2:23 that He will have pity on His beloved, even though He has been wounded by her unfaithfulness (Hosea 2:4,5). His relationship with His people causes Him to “cry out” and to “roar” (Isaiah 42:13,14; Amos 1:2).

Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit being “grieved” by the sins of His people (Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30). Jesus wept over Jerusalem as He saw her blindness and stubbornness (Luke 13:34,35; 19:41–44; Matthew 23:37–39).

From these verses and others, Fretheim observes:

God is revealed not as one who remains coolly unaffected by the rejection of the people, but as one who is deeply wounded by the broken relationship. The interaction between God and people thus takes place not simply at the intellectual level as it were, not in a law court; the exchange occurs also at the emotional level. God shares feelings, not just thoughts. The people know not only what God thinks, but what God feels. Thus, a holistic picture of God appears. God relates at every level with the whole person of each person.⁸⁷

In our interpersonal relationships with one another, we, as human beings, know what it is like to have our love rejected and thrown back into our face. This also has

been the story of man's relationship with God—a story of human rejection and divine suffering.

Suffering Sympathetically

We also see in Scripture that God suffers sympathetically *with* His people. “Our personal afflictions involve the Living God.”⁸⁸ When Israel was in bondage in Egypt, God not only saw their plight and heard their groaning (Exodus 2:24) but Isaiah 63:9 says, “*In all their affliction He was afflicted.*”

When the Lord confronted Saul of Tarsus on the dusty road to Damascus, He asked this man who was the cause of so much suffering among His people, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4, emphasis added). In this statement, Jesus declares His solidarity with His Church.⁸⁹ After all, the Church is His body (Ephesians 5:23).

When His people suffer, He suffers. That is the meaning of the word *sympathy*. Sympathy is not merely feeling sorry *for* someone. It means “to share the feelings of another; a relationship between persons or things whereby whatever affects one also affects the other.”⁹⁰

In the truest sense, God sympathizes with us in our afflictions (Hebrews 4:15). John Stott puts it this way: “It is wonderful that we may share in Christ's suffering; it is more wonderful still that He shares in ours. Truly his name is ‘Emmanuel,’ ‘God with us.’”⁹¹

One of the wonders of knowing the suffering God is the realization that we never face life alone. When those who suffer cry out, “God, where are You?” God replies with a name, “Emmanuel.” As we shall continue to see in this study, that which was introduced in the book of Job is evident throughout Scripture: God consistently answers the question of suffering with a revelation of Himself. Those who suffer frequently find themselves in need of a meaningful answer to the question, “Why?” God, however, knows that the real need of the sufferer is to know the answer to the question, “Who?”⁹²

When it comes to the problem of pain in the life of the child of God, the Lord is much more than a God who “watches over us.” He is Emmanuel. He does more than feel sorry for us; He gets involved. As Deuteronomy 31:8 says, “*The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you or forsake you; do not be discouraged*” (NIV).

GOD AS SELF-GIVER

It is a mark of doctrinal orthodoxy to hold that God is monotheistically one, as reflected in the confessional statement of Deuteronomy 6:4: “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*” Yet orthodoxy also holds that God is triune—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—as we read in Matthew 28:19: “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” “The Godhead is one in three, and the three are one,” summarized the fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nazianzen.

In his discussion on the inner life of God, Arthur C. McGill discusses the important doctrinal disputes regarding the Trinity that took place in the fourth century between Athanasius and Arius.⁹³ McGill argues that the root of the problem was not, as commonly believed, a mathematical one of devising how three can be one, but a dispute concerning how divinity can be produced or generated and still be divinity. Arius argued that if the Father could beget the Son, give His being to another, and if His reality could be received by another, then that reality would immediately cease to be the reality of God. Jesus, therefore, could not be true God if He were derived from or begotten of God. God is undivided, not dependent on anyone, not derived from another, with no need to change Himself, communicate Himself, or generate Himself. To assert that the Son was divine would, to Arius’ mind, violate the very divinity of God. Jesus, Arius argued, had a beginning and was created as God’s first creature through whom all others were made. To uphold His self-containment and absoluteness, God had no direct involvement with His creatures, but ruled strictly through an agent (Jesus).

Regarding Arius, McGill observes:

In all the history of Christianity there has hardly been a so sophisticated, so Biblically grounded, and so thoroughgoing a theology of God’s transcendence as that developed by Arius and his followers. Their whole concern was to honor God by setting him above and in contrast to his creatures. They sought to preserve the glory of God by divesting his reality of all those weaknesses and deficiencies that mark his creatures, and by giving him the most absolute mastery over his creatures.⁹⁴

Athanasius challenged that this high, absolute, untouched and untouchable, nondependent God is not the God of the Bible. To worship such a God would be to worship a false God. To know God as He has fully revealed Himself is to know God in Trinity—not as a static oneness or an independent three-ness but rather as possessing both mutual interpenetrating unity and differentiation.

Contradicting Arius, Athanasius argued that the Son was eternally fully derived or generated from the Father, yet completely equal to God. For Athanasius, the relationship between the Father and the Son is rather like that between a fountain and the stream that flows from it: “Just as a river springing from a fountain is not separated from it, although there are two forms and two names, so neither is the Father the Son or the Son the Father.”⁹⁵ There is distinction between the members of the Trinity as well as unity, as expressed in the term “oneness of essence.”

Although it seems awkward to state it as such, there is a sense in which the members of the Trinity need each other, without this neediness detracting from their true divinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit give and take from each other without barriers. Roderick Leupp observes: “Each knows the other two perfectly and in turn is fully known by them.”⁹⁶ The Son is begotten from the Father. The Father does not monopolize divine life but shares it eternally.⁹⁷ The Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son.⁹⁸ The Son gives all glory to the Father (John 14:13). The Spirit gives all glory to the Son (John 16:14). The Spirit speaks on the Son’s authority (John 16:13) and the Son speaks what He has heard from the Father (John 8:28). Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (John 5:19). As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted it to the Son (John 5:26). For the Spirit to come, the Son must go to the Father and send the Spirit (John 16:7), and the Father gave the Son because He loved the world (John 3:16). There is among the members of the Trinity a relationship of total and mutual self-giving. The Father holds nothing back from the Son and the Son holds nothing back from the Father.

From eternity, the Father prepared to offer the Son for creation, and the Son from eternity has submitted in trust and obedience, finding its culmination on the cross as He was slain at Golgotha, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. When the Son ascended to the Father into heaven, following His resurrection, He sent the Holy Spirit to unify believers with each other. The Spirit also empowers them to witness to the sacrificial act of God so that others may have life through the Spirit who gives it and become sons and daughters of the Father of their brother Jesus Christ.⁹⁹

This relationship of giving and receiving, depending on each other, and offering themselves to each other makes the God of the Bible very different from the absolute, completely transcendent, monolithic Arian perception of God.

God’s triune nature has profound implications for how He interacts with His creation. His acts are based upon His character, and knowing God as One who gives and receives, serving and needing, we should not be surprised when we see His answer to suffering and need as one of giving and offering Himself in love. His plans are not achieved by force or power but by love and self-giving. The cross is the nat-

ural expression of the character of the triune God. He could not have another answer to man's need and still be consistent with Himself.¹⁰⁰

In the *Epistle to Diognetus*, an anonymous Christian letter written approximately A.D. 125–200, the question is asked how God sent His Son. The answer given is:

To rule as a Tyrant, to inspire terror and astonishment? No, he did not. No, he sent him in gentleness and mildness. To be sure, as a king sending his royal son, he sent him as God. But he sent him as to men, as saving and persuading them, and not exercising force. For force is no attribute of God.¹⁰¹

McGill writes:

“Force is no attribute of God”—that is the basic principle of the Trinitarian theologians. God's divinity does not consist in his ability to push things around, to make and break, to impose his will from the security of some heavenly remoteness, and to sit in grandeur while all the world does his bidding. Far from staying above the world, he sends his own glory into it. Far from imposing, he invites and persuades. Far from demanding service from men in order to enhance himself, he gives his life in service to men for their enhancement. But God acts towards the world in this way because within himself is a life of self-giving.¹⁰²

Thus, when Jesus comes to earth as the revelation of the God, is it any wonder that He comes as a sacrifice? This is completely consistent with who God is within Himself. Jesus' self-giving of Himself is not merely a means to an end, even a noble end. It is precisely a revelation of who He is. His acts of sacrifice, serving, love, and giving are acts of divinity.¹⁰³ They reveal that He is the presence of God among us—Emmanuel. They also provide prescriptions for how God's people ought to live (see Philippians 2:3–8).

The revelation that force is no attribute of God also has profound implications for how God's servants fulfill His purposes. They, too, operate on the basis of persuasion and self-giving sacrifice and love. They do not force their message upon others. In 2003, Rev. Gary Edmonds, Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, offered a definition of the difference between evangelism and proselytism that is consistent with this understanding:

As there is misunderstanding and misuse of the words proselytism and evangelism in the world today, World Evangelical Alliance wants to share an official definition of these words. WEA strongly rejects proselytism but supports full religious freedom according to the United Nations declaration of Human Rights (Articles 18 and 19). That freedom will give people of every religion the right to

share their beliefs and allow everyone the freedom of conscience to believe as they choose.

According to World Evangelical Alliance to proselytize and to evangelize are not synonymous. Citing Dr. John R. W. Stott, “The best way to distinguish them is to understand proselytism as ‘unworthy witness.’ The World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church produced a helpful study document in 1970 titled ‘Common Witness and Proselytism.’ It identified three aspects of proselytism. Proselytism takes place (1) whenever our motives are unworthy (when our concern is for our glory rather than God’s), (2) whenever our methods are unworthy (when we resort to any kind of ‘physical coercion, moral constraint, or psychological pressure’), and (3) whenever our message is unworthy (whenever we deliberately misrepresent other people’s beliefs). In contrast, to evangelize is (in the words of the Manila Manifesto) ‘to make an open and honest statement of the gospel, which leaves the hearers entirely free to make up their own minds about it. We wish to be sensitive to those of other faiths, and we reject any approach that seeks to force conversion on them.’”¹⁰⁴

Another significant ramification of this revelation of God’s character concerns how Christians are to respond to heresy, which is a significant problem in many restricted nations. Richard Bell, in his 1925 Gunning Lectures at Edinburgh University, made an astute observation about one of the possible reasons for the rapid collapse of Christianity in the seventh century in the face of the Islam. Bell suggests that it was largely due to the fact that, over time, church leaders lost sight of some significant truths as they engaged in the crucial battles over the nature of Christ and the Trinity during the fourth to sixth centuries.

The Christians of those ages, proud in the possession of the truth, appear to have lost faith in the power of the truth ultimately to triumph over error, and the duty of love towards fellow-men, not to speak of fellow-Christians, was forgotten in the zeal for orthodoxy.¹⁰⁵

Having gradually gained political power through the legalization of Christianity with the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313, Christian leaders increasingly called upon the secular authorities to enforce fidelity to the decisions of various church councils. In the process, they seemed to forget that force is no attribute of God and, therefore, neither should it be an attribute of His people.

Doctrinal orthodoxy is unquestionably essential to the Church, but its enforcement must be in line with the character of the God.¹⁰⁶ As Bell notes, the trouble with the Church in the sixth century lay not so much in its intellectual activity and theological speculation as in the impatience of the Church.¹⁰⁷ This is not to say that

error should go unchecked. Church discipline may indeed prove to be necessary. However, it should be done with tears and not a clenched fist.¹⁰⁸

MESSIANIC EXPECTATIONS

Definition of Messiah

The term “messiah” is the translation of the Hebrew adjective and noun *j yvmf* (*māshîah*), which is derived from the verb *j yvmf* (*māsah*), meaning “to anoint, spread a liquid.”¹⁰⁹ *Masah* was a commonly used term by Israelites and non-Israelites to describe when grease or oil was applied to objects or a body or paint to house. It was also used, ceremonially, to signify a person or object being separated for a specific office or purpose.¹¹⁰

The term “messiah” (*j yvmf*) itself was not used to refer to “anointed” objects that were designated and consecrated for specific cultic purposes but to persons only. Persons who were “anointed” had been elected, designated, appointed, given authority, qualified, and equipped for specific offices and tasks. The term was used almost exclusively as a synonym for “king” (1 Samuel 12:3,5), but priests (Leviticus 4:5), the patriarchs (Psalm 105:15), prophets (1 Kings 19:16; Isaiah 61:1), and even a heathen monarch (Isaiah 45:1) are all said to be “anointed.”

While some argue that “anointed” or “anointed one” were not used directly in the Hebrew Bible as a title for a future messianic person who would save Israel, here is strong reason to believe, based on the context of verse 24, that Daniel 9:26 refers to none other than the promised Messiah.¹¹¹

A transliteration of the term “Messiah” in Greek (*MESSIAH*) appears only twice in the New Testament (John 1:41; 4:25) as an explanation of the Greek word *CRISTOS* (*khristos*). In the New Testament, the Greek word *CRISTOS* was linguistically identical to *j yvmf*, meaning “one who has been anointed.”¹¹²

The Expectations of First-Century Judaism

If we were to try to generalize about what the first-century Jews expected in a messianic figure, we would note immediately its diversity. Depending on the writer or the community, the messianic figure’s description ranged from king to priest to prophet.¹¹³

Rabbinical tradition of Jesus’ time was diverse. There were many groups, with a diversity of expectations derived from, or tied to, varied interpretations of a number of Scriptural passages.

The major sources for identifying the prevailing concepts of Messiah in the first century are:

- the Septuagint
- the Apocalyptic/Pseudepigraphical works
- the Jewish Apocrypha
- the Dead Sea Scrolls
- the rabbinical writings which included:
 - the Mishnah, a codified collection of the Oral Law with legal interpretations of portions of the biblical books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and other legal material¹¹⁴
 - the Talmud, a vast compilation of the Oral Law with rabbinical elucidations, elaborations, and commentaries of the Mishnah¹¹⁵
 - the Midrash, a verse-by-verse interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures, consisting of homily and exegesis, by Jewish teachers since about 400 B.C.¹¹⁶
- the Targums, interpretative renderings of the Hebrew Scriptures in Aramaic for use in synagogue worship¹¹⁷
- the writings of Philo and Josephus, especially when they speak of messianic claimants of the time
- the New Testament

To summarize in general terms, the Messiah was typically seen as the bridge between heaven and earth. He would bring the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven to the earth. He would bring God's salvation. The Messiah would bring cleansing from sin to Israel, which will bring the people back to God's Law.

Some looked forward to an ideal future Davidic king who would rule the people in God's place,¹¹⁸ or to a priestly king who would combine Davidic and Mosaic traits. Others, reading Deuteronomy 18:15–18, looked for a latter-day prophet like Moses, while reading Malachi 3:1 and 4:5 led some to look to an Elijah-like figure who would prepare the way for God Himself. Some apocryphal books like 1 Enoch and the Testament of Judah led some to look for a pre-existent super-human, quasi-divine figure, while others saw the Messiah as a definite political figure. Still others, disillusioned with what they had seen of earthly kings, saw him as a transcendental Messiah, disassociated from any physical kingship.

Simply put (if such a thing could be simply put), these figures ranged from purely human Davidic kings to the transcendent and pre-existent quasi-divine Savior King, with a variety of combinations in-between (e.g., Philo, some of the Qumran materials).

It would be incorrect to affirm that every first-century Jew had a passionate expectation of a Messiah figure or that the first-century Jewish expectation was exclusively of a New Testament–model God-man Messiah.¹¹⁹ But it would be equally incorrect to say that the first-century Jew had no expectation of a Messiah figure or that the first-century Jewish expectation was of a purely natural, human, regular political leader. There was certainly no single “orthodox” notion of what “the Messiah” would be. Judaism never reached agreement on what to expect of the future, except that all believed that God would eventually vindicate His people.¹²⁰ This could explain why the Jews of Jesus’ day didn’t seem to understand what we, as Christians living 2,000 years later, see as so obvious.

What we can affirm is that a messianic expectation (broadly considered) was present in the wide range of Jewish groups that produced literature throughout the period and that for some of them, their expectations for the “deliverer who shall come forth from Jacob” was intense, theologically-charged, and surprisingly detailed.¹²¹

By the first-century messianic expectations were widespread and strong enough to lead groups of people to accept various individuals as people sent by God to liberate His people. “It was into this world of mixed hopes, pre-conceived categories, and pre-built eschatologies that Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed that ‘the Kingdom of God has drawn nigh’...”¹²² It was also inevitable that there would be those (even large numbers) who would refuse to accept His claims.

The Expectations of the Disciples

Peter (Matthew 16)

There are turning points in the pages of history—times when decisions are made, actions are taken, or things are said—which mark the end of one chapter and the beginning on another. Matthew 16 is such a turning point. Jesus takes His disciples to the far northern region near the city of Caesarea Philippi, where He asks them a question, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” (16:13).

Verses 14–20 record the conversation that follows:

And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not

revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.¹²³

Verse 21 marks the turning point in Jesus’ ministry.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.¹²⁴

While Peter had correctly identified Jesus as the “anointed one” of God, it is obvious from his response to Jesus’ words that he does not understand how suffering, shame, and death can be part of the plan of God. He takes Jesus aside and says, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (16:22).

Jesus had heard this message before. During His temptation in the wilderness, Satan had tempted Him to achieve greatness without dying, inviting Him to bypass the cross. Now, He hears the temptation again from the mouth of one of His disciples. And so, just as He rebuked Satan in the wilderness (4:10), He turns to Peter and says, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (16:23).

In our day, the mind of man is manifested similarly in the belief that suffering has no place in the life of the Christian. It finds its voice in the assertion that persecution is an intrusion in the life of the Church and the believer, and that opposition is a rare exception. It is heard when people wonder aloud that perhaps God has forsaken those who suffer persecution or that the persecuted are suffering because they have done something wrong or because of sin in their life.

Earlier in this chapter, I recalled the story of the woman who could not understand how God could, apparently, forsake His people in the midst of persecution. Tragically, her questions to me starkly reflected the mind of man, rather than the mind of God.

In Peter’s mind, suffering had no place in the plan of God for His Messiah. His messianic expectations did not include a suffering Christ. He was thinking as men do, not as God does.

How does Jesus respond to this mentality?

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (16:24,25)

Jesus wants Peter to understand that what He has just said about His own life and ministry is exactly how God is going to work in the life of all who are part of God's plan. It is not only the Christ who will suffer and die; it will also be the fate of all those who follow Him. This is how God thinks.

While Peter was able to identify who Jesus was, he failed to grasp what being the Messiah of God meant. What Jesus was talking about did not fit Peter's expectations for who the Christ was. He had messianic expectations that a crucified Christ didn't fit into.

John the Baptist (John 1; Matthew 11)

If anyone should have known who Jesus was, it should have been John the Baptist.¹²⁵ Commissioned with the ministry of preparing the way for Jesus, he was the first to call Jesus "the Lamb of God."

Paradoxically, in John chapter 1, we read of John being asked who *he* was:

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:19–28)

The very next day, the Bible tells us that John "saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel" (John 1:29,30).

If anyone should have been able to correctly answer the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" it should have been John the Baptist.

When he heard the voice of heaven saying about Jesus, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17), John would have been pleased as well. This is why he had come into the world—to point the way, to prepare the people for the Lamb of God, God's Son who would deliver them from their bondage to sin.

As Jesus walked off following His baptism, John must have wondered how God was going to work through Jesus and looked forward to seeing the promised deliverance.

John continues his ministry of preaching repentance, eventually ending up in prison for having the audacity to condemn the king's marriage to his sister-in-law—a marriage that, according to the Law of Moses, was incestuous. Such a union was unlawful and immoral and John called it for what it was. Enraging both Herod and his new wife, he was arrested and thrown into prison. Fearing the people, Herod did not have him executed (Matthew 14:3–5; Mark 6:17,18).

Held in a miserable jail cell, John was cut off from the outside world. Still, as much as he could, he kept his ear to the ground. He wanted to know how his cousin Jesus was doing. But what he heard confused him.

John had lived a life of austerity and preached a straightforward message of repentance. Jesus, on the other hand, ate and drank with sinners. When He spoke, it was usually in the form of stories that people had a hard time understanding. It was almost as if He was deliberately making it hard for people to accept God's message.

John's ministry had been public, preached in front of great crowds. Jesus spoke to great crowds every now and then as well, but most of the time He spoke in homes to small groups here and there. When He performed a miracle, He told people not to tell others.

Jesus was not acting at all as John had expected. John expected that Jesus had come to preach a message of deliverance. But now John sits in prison for preaching the message of repentance and righteousness that God had given him. And the more John hears about what Jesus is doing, the more perplexed he becomes. He hears of the blind receiving their sight. The demon-possessed are delivered. There are even reports of the dead being raised to life! But John sits in the cold and dark, hearing the screams of fellow prisoners. And he wonders why he is being overlooked.

He has been faithful to God. He has prepared the way for his little cousin's ministry. And now he sits and rots in Herod's dungeons. Why? Is God to blame? Perhaps . . . it is his cousin's fault.

Doubt begins to eat into his soul, maybe even resentment. Finally he can wait no longer. He sends some of his disciples to Jesus with a simple message, a message that he perhaps hopes will spur Jesus into action more appropriate to being the Messiah. We read the account in Matthew 11:2–6:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the

*blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. **And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.***” (emphasis added)

The *New International Version* renders the last phrase, “*Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.*” When Jesus does not act according to our expectations and our “graven image” of what God must be like is shattered by the message and methodology of Jesus, the man who is blessed is the man who accepts Jesus as He is, not as what we would expect or wish Him to be. The signs and wonders are consistent with who the Messiah is, but they are not *all* that He is. He acts on behalf of the needy because of who He is, not because this is the means by which He will accomplish His purposes.

Jesus tells John’s disciples to inform John that some are receiving sight. Others are receiving their hearing. Some of the dead are being raised to life. And the good news is reaching many of the poor.

Are all of the blind receiving sight? No. Are all of the deaf being healed? No, there were still many blind and deaf people left in Israel after Jesus’ earthly ministry concluded. Most of the dead were still dead. Jesus is choosing to raise some but not all. And certainly not everyone had yet heard the good news.

It appears that Jesus is saying to John, “Not everyone, John, is being released from their troubles, just like you are not. Don’t lose faith. Trust me, even when the prison doors remain closed.”

A popular evangelistic tract begins with the words, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” This is true, every word of it. What is often misunderstood is what is meant by “a wonderful plan for your life.” We assume that this must mean a combination of peace, prosperity, and power, or at the very least one of them in some measure. What if God calls you to a life of suffering, misunderstanding, and pain? To live and serve in relative obscurity? Will you continue to love and trust Him?

John is living out what Jesus teaches His apostles about what it means to follow Him. The way of the Messiah is the way of suffering, self-sacrifice, and trust. While others may benefit from His ministry, those who follow Him must often walk the way of suffering and death. Not everyone can accept this, but blessed are those who do not fall away because of Jesus.

The Transfiguration (Matthew 17; Mark 9; Luke 9)

The Transfiguration narrative occurs in all three of the synoptic Gospels and each follows the same sequence:

- 1) Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah
- 2) Jesus' charge to the disciples not to tell anyone
- 3) Jesus' prediction of His coming suffering, death, and resurrection
- 4) His call to those who would be His disciples to follow Him in self-sacrifice
- 5) the Transfiguration
- 6) Jesus' command not to tell anyone what they have seen until after the resurrection
- 7) a discussion (except in Luke) on the coming of Elijah
- 8) the healing of a demon-possessed boy
- 9) a second prediction of Jesus' passion¹²⁶

Liefeld notes that each “of these short sections of narrative and dialog pertains in some way to who Jesus is and why he came.”¹²⁷ The central event, however, is the Transfiguration account and this is the focus of our study in this section.

In Matthew's account, as was noted earlier, the Transfiguration account occurs at a transitional point in the gospel. In 16:16, Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, to which Jesus had replied that such an identification could come only through revelation from God (verse 17). James Penner suggests that the Transfiguration account is linked to this confession through the temporal reference of “six days” in 17:1 and the similarity of Peter's confession and the proclamation by God in 17:5.¹²⁸ For the disciples who so often doubted or misunderstood who Jesus was (as Peter did immediately following his confession), God's proclamation, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased, listen to Him*” (17:6), further reveals the nature of the Messiah. The revelation of His glory through His transformation further adds to this identification.

While some suggest that the proclamation of the Father would have been, in part, an assurance for Jesus, this does not seem to be the case in Matthew's Gospel especially. In Matthew's account of the Transfiguration, God declares, “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased,*” which is identical in wording to His confirmation at Jesus' baptism in 3:17. It is interesting to note that in the baptism accounts in Mark and Luke, the voice referred to Jesus in the second person rather than in the third person. Only in Matthew is it in the third person, just as it is in 17:5. Penner notes: “For Matthew, both sayings are for the sake of the disciples, though the audience at the baptism is unknown. This may reflect Matthew's em-

phasis upon the disciples.”¹²⁹ The sayings are directed at them, as identification of who Jesus is and a confirmation of His nature and purpose.¹³⁰

The presence of Elijah and Moses and the command to listen to Jesus also clarified for the disciples the significance of Jesus as the Son of God. As the three disciples accompanying Jesus witness Him being transfigured, they see Moses and Elijah join Him and speak with Him. The three being together does confirm that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, which He was careful to stress in His teaching,¹³¹ and shows that the Old Testament bears witness to Jesus. However, when Peter suggests that perhaps, if Jesus would wish it, he would be willing to build three tents, “*one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah*” (verse 4), God interrupts him with the command to listen to Jesus. Penner writes,

Peter’s suggestion to build three tents was likely for the purpose of honoring Jesus, Moses and Elijah, but it put the three on equal standing. It was not enough to acknowledge Jesus’ authority as equal to that of Moses and Elijah. His authority, based on His intimate relationship with the Father, is far greater. The proclamation from God was a rebuke of Peter’s mind-set as much as a rebuke for his suggestion as such.¹³²

The command to “listen” also calls to mind the prophecy from Deuteronomy 18:15–20 referring to “*a prophet like [Moses]*” to whom they must listen. God’s words to the disciples, however, reinforce that Jesus, while a prophet like Moses, is far superior to him, and is the one to whom they should listen.

What the disciples are to “listen” to is unclear. Penner contends that because Jesus’ death is not mentioned in the Transfiguration account in Matthew’s Gospel (unlike Luke’s) during the discussion among Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, the command to “listen” is not in reference to the prophecy made in 16:21, but to Jesus’ entire teaching.¹³³ I disagree. In my opinion, the context is clarifying. The Transfiguration is book-ended with teaching on Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection and it seems logical to assume that it was this to which the Father alludes in His command to “listen.” Even following the event, the disciples still have questions, just as they had strong objections prior to the Transfiguration regarding the need for the Messiah to suffer and die. Peter’s misunderstanding during the Transfiguration about who Jesus was requires that he and the other disciples listen to Him as He explains to them just who and what the Messiah is and how God’s plans will be fulfilled through Him. That Jesus is the Messiah is made clear to the disciples as they are leaving the mountain and they realize that John the Baptist was the promised “Elijah” prophesied in Malachi as a precursor to the Messiah’s coming.

That the disciples fail to understand who Jesus is, is clear in Matthew’s Transfiguration account. But Matthew also holds out hope for such disciples in 17:7.

Jesus, seeing the disciples rebuked, terrified, and on their faces, touches them, saying, “*Rise, and have no fear.*” Other references in the Synoptics to the phrase “have no fear” (mh; fobeisqe) center around the care and compassion of Jesus for His disciples. Penner states:

The disciples seriously misunderstood Jesus’ true nature, as shown by Peter’s suggestion, which immediately resulted in God’s response. They had been admonished by the Father Himself, but the time for compassion and perhaps a spiritual or psychological “healing” had come.¹³⁴

For the disciple today who fails to understand the cost of discipleship, who has resisted the concept that to follow Jesus calls for self-sacrifice to the point of death, Jesus still reaches out and says, “*Rise, and have no fear.*”

Mark’s account is the most compact of the Synoptic accounts. The chief distinction of Mark’s Gospel is the discussion that follows the Transfiguration. In Mark’s account we read that Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone about what they witnessed until “*the Son of Man had risen from the dead*” (9:9). The disciples, however, have no idea what He meant by “*rising from the dead*” (9:10). This is not surprising. The disciples consistently misunderstand the nature of Jesus and it is obvious that not even the Transfiguration helped them to grasp this.¹³⁵

The Transfiguration occurs in a particularly significant setting in Luke’s Gospel, as Liefeld points out:

The Messianic confession by Peter (Lk. 9:20) is part of a sequence that Luke has featured by drawing three events more closely together than they are in the accounts of Matthew and Mark: (1) Jesus calms the sea, which evokes the disciples’ words “Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water and they obey him” (Lk. 8:25); (2) Herod Antipas hears of Jesus’ miracles and says “Who, then, is this about whom I hear such things?” (Lk. 9:9); (3) Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is, to which Peter responds, “The Christ (Messiah) of God” (Lk. 9:20). The question of the identity of Jesus is thus emphasized.¹³⁶

Luke then arranges the significant events and dialog introduced by Peter’s confession in a chiasmic order. A chiasmus is a literary and rhetorical device where the author introduces two or more parallel thoughts and then repeats them in reverse order.

- A – Luke 9:20 – Jesus’ *identity* is stated by Peter
- B – Luke 9:22 – Jesus’ *death* is stated by Jesus
- C – Luke 9:26 – Jesus’ *future* coming in glory is stated
- C¹ – Luke 9:29 – Jesus’ *glory* is visibly demonstrated

B¹ – Luke 9:31 – Jesus’ *death* is discussed by Moses and Elijah

A¹ – Luke 9:35 – Jesus’ *identity* is affirmed by a voice from heaven¹³⁷

Luke’s account also differs in that the heavenly voice says of Jesus, “*This is my Son, my Chosen One*” (9:35).¹³⁸ This is likely a reference to Isaiah 42:1 in the Septuagint (with a slight verbal modification) where the Servant of God is described as God’s chosen instrument to bring justice to the nations.¹³⁹ Just as Isaiah’s Servant is one who suffers in order to accomplish the plan of God, so are Jesus and all who would follow Him (Luke 9:21–27).

The Ascension (Acts 1; Matthew 28)

Even after Jesus’ death and resurrection, the disciples still needed instruction regarding their messianic expectations. In Acts 1:6 we find them asking Jesus, “*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*” The disciples had often asked such questions throughout Jesus’ ministry¹⁴⁰ and it is obvious that they still had these expectations in mind.

Jesus replies, “*It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (NIV).

The disciples’ task is not to worry about when the kingdom is coming. That is the Father’s concern. Their task is to be His witnesses. The disciples had witnessed God’s plan for the salvation of mankind, and they could not keep it to themselves. They must tell others what God had done for them. Had Jesus restored the kingdom as the disciples had hoped, the population under His rule would have been restricted to His small group of followers. *This* was not God’s plan. What has been done for the whole world must be told to the world so that others can experience what the disciples had experienced.

“*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8)

Having given this commission, Jesus withdraws from His disciples’ sight.

And when He had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (Acts 1:9)

After a moment of hesitation, they do return to Jerusalem where, a few days later, they receive God’s enabling power for witnessing, as Jesus promised.

In Matthew’s account of Christ’s last commission we read that Jesus told His disciples to go and teach all nations, and He promised that He would be with them

wherever they went, to the very end of history. It is here and in Acts 1 that the disciples finally understand the sort of Messiah Jesus is: He is the one who is with us. He dwells in our midst as we carry out His work of bringing the gospel to the world, of expanding His kingdom, bringing the message of reconciliation to a lost world as we await His coming glory.

The Strategy of Jesus

As we look at the ministry of Jesus, it becomes apparent that Jesus presents Himself as the “anointed one” of God, but He recognizes that the disciples simply could not understand what the Messiah would truly be like until He had died and risen from the dead.

It is in this light that Jesus repeatedly insists that people who discover He is the Messiah keep this revelation to themselves. We see this most clearly in Mark’s Gospel.

- When Jesus casts an evil spirit out of a man, He orders the demon to be quiet about His identity (1:21–25).
- Jesus would not let the demons speak because “they knew who He was” (1:34; see also 3:11,12).
- When He heals the man with leprosy, He issues a “strong warning” that he must not speak about the miracle to anyone (1:43,44).
- Jesus issues a similar warning after His healing of Jairus’s daughter (5:43).
- Often His warnings went unheeded, as during the time when He healed the deaf and mute man (7:31–37).
- At times, Jesus even tried to hide His whereabouts, usually without success (7:24; 9:30,31).
- After Jesus heals the blind man outside of Bethsaida, He does not let him go into the village to reveal that the healing has taken place. Instead, He sends him home (8:22–26; some manuscripts record Jesus as saying, “Don’t go and tell anyone in the village”).
- When Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus strictly warns the disciples “not to tell anyone about him” (8:29,30).
- In like manner, Jesus does not want the Mount of Transfiguration experience to become public knowledge until after His resurrection (9:2–10).

Why is there a need for all of this secrecy?

First, Jesus' "secret" teaching concerning the kingdom of God is meant to be revealed only to His chosen disciples, and not to the general population (Mark 4:10–12,33,34; 9:30,31). The latter will be in a better position to comprehend Jesus' true significance after the resurrection.

Second, Jesus' role as a servant-Messiah who would suffer and die for the sins of humanity is in stark contrast to His generation's more glamorous messianic expectations. Jesus fears that an uncontrolled explosion of knowledge concerning His messianic identity based on miraculous stories would encourage false expectations that He had no intention of fulfilling.

Third, all nine instances noted above take place in Mark 1:12—10:31, prior to His announcement about going to Jerusalem to die (10:32). After this, in contrast, He does not silence the crowds when He enters Jerusalem (at the beginning of His passion). As He draws closer to the climax of His ministry, it becomes more and more obvious what sort of Messiah He is, even though the disciples do not seem to be able to grasp it. The emphasis of His ministry shifts from His incarnation with the demonstration of miraculous power (as He seeks to alleviate the suffering of others), to His atoning death, where the emphasis is on His demonstration of sacrificial love.

His ministry as suffering Savior builds on His revelation that He is the incarnate Son of God. His earlier "secret" becomes fully revealed at the right time—in His death and resurrection. As the incarnate Son of God, He shows love through His miraculous works. As the suffering Servant, He expresses love through suffering and self-denial.

THE CALL OF DISCIPLESHIP, THE CALL OF THE CROSS

To this point, my goal has been to show that a theology of persecution rests on the revealed truth that suffering is not foreign to the purposes and person of God but rather, as we have discovered, it is a central theme.

It should therefore come as no surprise when Jesus teaches His followers that suffering is a part of the new life they have received from God. Jesus devoted what might seem like an inordinate amount of attention to the issues of persecution and martyrdom,¹⁴¹ as He taught His disciples what to do when on trial for the faith, and how they should respond when expelled and condemned by families, villages, and religious and political authorities. All that the apostles will write about and teach in the years that follow are grounded in what they hear and see in Jesus when He was

with them. With that in mind, our task must be to understand what Jesus meant when He originally gave these teachings.

Matthew

There is little question that Matthew's Gospel is, at least in part, a manual on discipleship. All the major discourses are directed to the disciples, and either the teaching segments are clearly identified as being for the disciples or those who ask Jesus questions in the discourse are identified as being disciples. Matthew's focus, however, is not on how the disciples respond to the teaching but on Jesus as a teacher, who calls, instructs, and sends out the disciples to make more of what He has made them to be.¹⁴² The disciples are not perfect. While they do not always grasp what Jesus is teaching them, Matthew is careful to portray Jesus as an effective teacher, whose teaching brings understanding.¹⁴³ Matthew depicts them honestly as those who both succeed and fail in their relationship with Christ as they are trained to go and make other disciples (28:19).

Matthew 5:10–12

Jesus commences His teaching of the disciples in His Sermon on the Mount, and so it is here that we will begin as well.

He begins by listing characteristics that will be developed in His disciples—characteristics that society sees as weaknesses but which He says are signs of God's blessing, traits that people should be congratulated for possessing.¹⁴⁴ When a man or woman accepts the demands of God's kingdom, having bowed before Jesus Christ and acknowledged Him as Lord, these characteristics begin to be developed. All true followers of Jesus possess them to a certain degree, and the call is to embrace them even deeper.

There is a call to exhibit these characteristics in the rest of the "sermon," but the Beatitudes are addressed to those who already are these things in some way. Jesus is speaking to those who have surrendered all by deciding to follow Him. In a sense one could say that these characteristics are the fruits of true repentance. All Christians are to be like these, not just mature or exceptional ones. These traits draw a line between those who are in the kingdom and those who are not.

Unfortunately, the Beatitudes are so familiar that I suspect they have lost their intended impact for many of us. Let us remember that Jesus calls "blessed" those whom the world calls unfortunate or even cursed. He congratulates those whom the world would pity. He encourages attitudes and conduct that the world would discourage—the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers.

Now, conceivably, we might be able to see positive aspects to each of these first seven attitudes. But in verse 10, Jesus calls “blessed” those whom I would suspect almost no one would consider blessed—those who suffer for doing what is right.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10–12)

Whereas many in the West consider themselves blessed for not having to suffer persecution, Jesus considered it a blessing to be persecuted.

Five principles regarding persecution stand out from this passage:¹⁴⁵

1. The most basic, but not to be overlooked, principle is that this suffering is “on my account.” It is for Christ’s cause. Men and women suffer in *His* service, for the fulfillment of *His* purposes in the world, because of their allegiance to *His* priorities and standards. Ultimately, God’s people do not suffer for *their faith*; they suffer for *Him*.
2. Jesus directs their attention to the fate of the prophets, God’s messengers in past generations. He means to instruct the disciples that they, like Him, are in the line of the prophets, in that they are God’s messengers to the world of their time. They have been chosen specifically for this purpose—to be sent to preach God’s message given to them by Jesus, just as He was.¹⁴⁶ After Jesus was killed, they would take His place and continue His ministry and function as prophet.
3. The disciples are not only to stoically accept the evil done to them by others, but they are to rejoice and be glad. Later in verses 39,44,45, they are instructed to love those who persecute them. As witnesses, their role was to bring the persecutors to God and to salvation.

The persecuted are to be in service to those who cause them the suffering. Just as the Father gives light and rain to those who revile Him and refuse to love Him, so are His children to bring blessings to those who curse them, seeking the good for those who seek only to do them harm.

4. There are tremendous past, present, and future promises that the persecuted can lay hold of. In verse 10, persecuted disciples are assured that they are possessors of the kingdom of heaven, just as the “*poor in spirit*” were (verse 3). The parallel between the two is not accidental. The “*poor in spirit*” are those to whom the

message of the gospel has been preached by the Servant of God (see Isaiah 61:1). In turn, like the Servant, they have been rejected and despised because they have taken up the Servant's mission: to proclaim the gospel to all nations. They have therefore become possessors of the kingdom of heaven, partakers in a sovereignty ruled by God. This kingdom is already partially present, experienced in part by those who, by faith, have submitted to God's kingly rule over their lives. Its final culmination is still in the future and it is that which the disciples anticipate. In the present, however, they experience ridicule, persecution, and slander (verse 11), as they actively seek to bring others into the kingdom.

The additional promise of verse 12 differs from those in the preceding Beatitudes in that it is much more complex. Guelich notes that the promise to the persecuted in verse 12 is declared in two causal clauses.¹⁴⁷ The first looks forward to the reward in heaven; the second looks back to the pattern of suffering experienced by the prophets in God's redemptive plan. Disciples are assured that they will be rewarded in heaven for their service for God. There is hope of better things because of the coming kingdom of God. They are also assured, as we noted earlier, that suffering for the sake of the kingdom is not unusual; indeed, it is the experience of all of God's messengers. The persecuted stand in good company and can be assured that God is present in their ministry. Because of these future and past promises, they can rejoice in the present (verse 12).

5. Persecution will be inevitable. The language used here depicts a situation where persecution is the expected norm for those who choose to follow Him. Jesus wants His disciples to understand right from the start that the path of Christ is not always an easy one. It is the right path, however, even though the world will sometimes move beyond ridicule, misunderstanding, and denunciation to violent rejection—seeking not only to silence the message of the gospel, but to remove the very presence of the messenger.

Matthew 10:16–42

Jesus' teaching on persecution is addressed in even closer detail in Matthew 10:16–42. The setting is just before He sends the disciples out on their first "mission." The timing is suggestive of the fact that Jesus wants His disciples to know that mission and persecution are inseparable. When done in the spirit of Jesus, you cannot have one without the other. When done in the spirit of Christ, mission has always taken place in the shadow of a cross.

Matthew 10:16–18

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves,” Jesus says in verse 16 of chapter 10.

Isaiah had previously described the position of the Servant of the Lord in the midst of His persecutors using the same imagery in Isaiah 53:7:

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is
silent, so he opened not his mouth.*

Jesus is putting His disciples in exactly the same position in the world. They will be defenseless to stop the onslaught that awaits them. They will be attacked, just as surely as a pack of wolves will set upon a flock of sheep. Survival, however, is not their prime concern. They are to be committed to accomplishing the purposes of God, even if it means their death. But as sheep among wolves, Jesus also gives them this warning, “*So be wise as serpents and innocent as doves*” (10:16).

“It is I who send you,” Jesus says, “into the midst of such dangers.” He uses the phrase *iḷḍouj egw*, emphasizing that it is He who is sending them. In such circumstances, the disciples are to conduct themselves in a manner becoming those who are His messengers.

In the face of persecution, it is easy to lose self-control and do foolish things—to respond with fear, and thereby compromise with the enemy. On the other hand, there is the equal danger of wrongly understanding courage, to provoke the authorities and deliberately attract persecution. Wisdom is needed to know what to do, where to stand, and what not to do, so that when suffering comes, it is truly for the sake of Christ and not because of one’s own foolishness.¹⁴⁸

The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, facing a situation where many of its member churches experience religiously motivated violence, has established a set of guidelines to assist Christians in knowing how to be “*as wise as serpents and innocent as doves*” while they are sheep in the midst of wolves:

- Being sensitive to the sound levels during meetings
- Being integrated to the village without alienating the community
- Being culturally sensitive to the community around you in your conduct, especially the youth
- Avoiding high-publicity programs on special religious holidays¹⁴⁹
- Not using relief or social programs as “bait” for evangelism (but for relationship and opportunity)

- Adopting a simple lifestyle consistent with the village
- Developing unity among Christian leaders in the area
- Gathering in small congregations if hostility persists
- Avoiding the promotion of foreigners or outsiders to prominent roles in the village
- Avoiding disrespectful comments about other religious groups at all times

Now, it is obvious from the following verses (verses 17,18) that the very nature of Jesus' message makes it impossible to avoid all opposition, regardless of how wise or innocent one may try to be. A disciple is still a lamb among wolves, which often means being arrested, interrogated, and tortured. This is the very nature of what it means to be a follower of Christ. But it is to wolves that the disciples are sent to witness (verse 18).

Guidelines for Christian-Muslim Dialogue

The Institute on Religion and Democracy
May 7, 2003

Within the Church, Christian-Muslim relations have been largely the concern of a small group of specialists. All that changed on September 11, 2001. Who are Muslims? What do they believe? What are the differences among Muslims? Can Christians and Muslims live together peacefully in the same society? These and other questions have fueled an outpouring of interest in education and encounters between Christians and Muslims.

A particular danger is over-simplification about Islam and Muslims—either positive or negative—that thwarts true dialogue, true education, and genuine Christian mission.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy offers the following guidelines to individuals, churches, and Christian organizations, particularly in the West, that aspire to interact with Muslims.

In Christian-Muslim dialogue, it is appropriate and necessary to:

1. Seek to understand Islam and Muslim peoples. Most U.S. churchgoers know little about Islam. If our churches are to show Christ's love effectively to our Muslim neighbors (near and far), we must clear away misconceptions and gain accurate insights into Muslim beliefs and practices.
2. Open ourselves to talk with all varieties and stations of Muslims. Of course, we recognize that some Muslims will decline the invitation to dialogue. But we must let them

make that choice, rather than screening our potential interlocutors for their presumed compatibility with our own perspectives.

3. Give testimony to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, because it is our duty to do so. Ultimately, Christ himself is the greatest blessing that we could offer to our Muslim interlocutors. The 2002 Oxford Consultation on the Future of Anglicanism noted helpfully: “Saint Paul uses dialogue and Saint Luke uses *dialogomai* to describe evangelism. It may involve arguing, explaining, proving, proclaiming and persuading (Acts 17:1–4,17)” (see www.wycliffe.ox.ac.uk for the consultation reports). It is our hope that numbers of Muslims would be persuaded by the testimony of Christians whom they encounter.
4. Make sure that the Christians entering into dialogue with Muslims have a firm grasp of an orthodox faith in the mainstream of the Christian tradition. Since their faith may be challenged and stretched in the dialogue, the Christian participants must know where the heart of that faith lies and where its boundaries are. Churches do no favor to the Muslims by sending out Christian “representatives” whose own faith is uncertain, confused, self-contradictory, and unable to distinguish between confessional essentials and their own idiosyncratic views.
5. Endeavor to have the Christian side of the dialogue represent not just the U.S. churches, but also the global Christian community. It would be preferable to have persons in attendance who could address Islam from an African or Asian Christian perspective—particularly Christians who have lived as a minority group within predominantly Muslim nations. If the presence of such persons is not possible, some means must be found to keep their perspectives in mind. What cannot be permitted is a situation that reduces Christian-Muslim dialogue to another “North-South” confrontation, as if Christianity were equivalent to the “North” and Islam to the “South.” In fact, we know that a growing proportion of the world’s Christians live in the “South,” and millions of Muslims are living in the “North.” For this same reason, the Muslim side of any global dialogue ought to include not only Muslims from predominantly Islamic developing nations, but also Muslims who live as minorities in non-Muslim nations.
6. Affirm some points of theology and morality that Islam and Christianity have in common. These illustrate the “natural law” or “common grace” that is revealed to all, as Paul argues in Romans 1—2. This affirmation is particularly strategic, as secularists in western societies often mischaracterize natural law principles as narrowly Christian doctrines that do not belong in the public square.
7. Address the deep differences between Islam and Christianity. Most basically, these relate to the person of Jesus Christ, who is at the center of our Christian faith. Muslims do not believe that he was God incarnate, that he truly and willingly died on the cross, that his death was the one atonement for all human sin, and that he was truly raised from the dead for our eternal life. In addressing these differences, Christians show themselves wiser and more winsome when they place their emphasis on positive affirmations of their own Christian faith. Negative judgments about Islamic beliefs and

practices—although these are sometimes necessary and are often implicit in the affirmations—should not be the principal theme of the Christian participants in the dialogue.

8. Work together with some Muslims on certain public issues in which we and they may have similar concerns (for instance, free exercise of religion in the United States, opposition to abortion, and promotion of refugee resettlement). We do so for the same reason that Christians are prepared to work with Jews, Mormons, and even atheists where we share common convictions about what justice requires.
9. Find ways in which our churches might practically show the love of Christ by being of service to our Muslim neighbors, here in the U.S. and internationally. We need to ask our Muslim interlocutors about the needs in their communities.
10. Discuss concepts of democracy, human rights, and religious freedom, as promulgated in international covenants to which most Muslim nations have subscribed. U.S. Christians should discuss how we find these concepts in accord with our Christian faith, how western societies developed these concepts historically, and the benefits that they have brought our societies. We should encourage our Muslim interlocutors to consider these concepts in the context of Islam, its history, and their own personal experiences.
11. Allow the open expression of concerns, fears, and grievances regarding the other party in the dialogue. A dialogue cannot advance very far unless it addresses the problems that each side perceives in the other. U.S. Christians must expect to hear Muslim complaints about the medieval crusades, modern western imperialism, and contemporary American society. It is fair to acknowledge that some of those complaints have validity. But it is neither historically accurate nor helpful for the Christians to accept the notion that the West is to be blamed for most of the ills in the Muslim world. Muslims must take primary responsibility for their own societies, as the historian Bernard Lewis argues.
12. Intercede for fellow Christians (and other religious minorities) who suffer persecution or restriction in predominantly Muslim nations. Particular concerns relate to bans on religious proselytism or conversion, state attempts to restrict or control religious activities, attempts to subject Christians to Islamic sharia, and other legal and political structures that treat Christians as second-class dhimmi. Christians should appeal to their Muslim interlocutors on the basis of reciprocity. Christians in Muslim nations ought to enjoy the same freedoms that Muslims do in the West. And as Christians commit themselves to safeguard the liberties of Muslims in America, so we must challenge Muslims to ensure religious freedom for Christians and other minorities in Muslim nations.

In Christian-Muslim dialogue, it is inappropriate and damaging to:

1. Attempt to meld Christianity and Islam, pretending that they have the same basic teachings and that the differences between the two are merely trivial points of theology.
2. Aim to establish inter-faith organizations that embody a new “macro-ecumenism,” joining Christians and Muslims in a unity analogous to the unity of the Body of Christ. If

Christians do participate in inter-faith organizations, these should be merely forums for dialogue and channels of limited cooperation—not bodies that pretend to a false unity where none exists.

3. Try to formulate and celebrate common acts of worship. As Christians who worship God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as instructed by our Lord Jesus, we find any worship that omits those names and concepts of God (offensive to Muslims) to be impoverished rather than enriched. We do not wish to strip our worship down to the point that Muslims would find it acceptable, nor do we require Muslims to reduce their worship to a point that would be acceptable to Christians. It is better to worship alongside Muslims, with them practicing what they consider to be proper worship while we Christians observe, and vice versa, rather than trying to have a common worship.
4. Expect that all blame for Christian-Muslim conflicts can be assigned to parties in the dialogue. The conflicts are too complicated and longstanding, and the dialogue too incomplete, for this assumption to hold. As Paul Marshall observes, “The Muslims who actually participate in dialogue are not usually the ones engaged in murder, kidnapping, or the rape of Christian women” (*Their Blood Cries Out*, p. 220). Likewise, an Eastern Orthodox or African Christian may not feel personally culpable for the crusades or Western European imperialism. Of course, Christians may express regret for abuses that other Christians have committed against Muslims, as God convicts us of those abuses. But we must not demand apologies from our Muslim interlocutors as the price for dialogue, nor must they require apologies from the Christian participants in the dialogue. We must not imagine that the differences between Islam and Christianity can be reduced to particular clashes.
5. Speak of the world as if it were neatly divided into spheres of influence, Muslim and Christian (and other), with no overlap or movement between the spheres. As noted above, there are millions of Christians in predominantly Muslim nations, and vice versa. In a free society Christians can convert to Islam, and vice versa. We cannot accept the notion that there is an “Islamic world” in which western Christians have no right to “meddle.” And, of course, Muslims have every right to be interested and involved in what goes on in western nations.
6. Talk only to elite Muslim scholars and religious officials who present a “textbook version” of Islam. It may be even more important to know the “popular Islam” as it is practiced on the street. We may learn more, and have a more fruitful conversation, by going to the local Muslim grocer than by going to the imam at the mosque.
7. Play political games inside the Muslim community, elevating leaders that we Christians favor and ignoring those that we dislike. It is not our place as Christians to determine who is and who is not an authentic leader in the Muslim community. We should simply talk and cooperate with all who will talk and cooperate. Naturally, some Muslims will be more willing to talk and cooperate than others. It is likely that our Muslim interlocutors will be more “moderate,” more tolerant, more interested in democracy, human

rights, and good relations with the West. And it is undeniable that we would prefer to have such persons exercise more influence within the Muslim community, for the sake of the values just named. But our ability to boost them inside their own religious community is, and should be, quite limited.

8. Assume that dialogue, in itself, is the solution to the theological and political issues between Christians and Muslims. Dialogue may clarify the real issues and remove some imagined issues. It may enable Christians and Muslims to work together more readily on matters where cooperation is possible. Mutual ignorance is a problem between Christians and Muslims; however, it is not the deepest problem. As Paul Marshall remarks, "The [extreme Islamist] people engaged in persecution are neither stupid nor uneducated . . . We will not understand persecution if we think it is a mere misunderstanding to be resolved through more education and chatty conferences" (*Their Blood Cries Out*, p. 220).

Matthew 10:19,20

To be a lamb in the midst of wolves would seem to be a hopeless and helpless situation. Yet Jesus provides this tremendous promise in verses 19,20 to those in such a state:

"When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

Believers around the world illustrate the truth of these verses as they testify how God gave them exactly the words to say when suffering for His sake. They cannot explain how the words came to them, how they were able to speak with such courage and eloquence, but God, through His Spirit, gave them the words needed to testify to the truth of Christ in the midst of affliction.

In their hour of need, God promises to provide the help that the disciples of Jesus require to remain faithful witnesses. Yet, as we shall see in verse 22, this does not negate the possibility that they may fail to use the help that the Spirit provides.

Tempted to Become a Bishop

In the combined thirteen years that Pastor Richard Wurmbrand had suffered under the hands of the Romanian communists, this was perhaps the most difficult. In the early years, the abuse had been primarily physical. But recently, the tactics of his torturers had changed. Drugs, deprivation, and brainwashing were proving to be even more effective in

breaking the wills of Christian leaders. At all hours of the day and night, the loudspeakers blasted:

Christianity is stupid.
 Christianity is stupid.
 Christianity is stupid.
 Why not give it up?
 Why not give it up?
 Why not give it up?
 Christianity is stupid.
 Christianity is stupid.
 Christianity is stupid.
 Why not give it up?
 Why not give it up?
 Why not give it up?

Alternately between threats and promises, the interrogators attempted to break Richard into denying his faith. At times he was given good meals, though probably laced with drugs. At other times, he was starved. In meetings with his interrogators, at one meeting he was allowed to argue with them; at the next he was punished for disagreeing with them. It was all calculated to keep him off balance and, thereby, most susceptible to their tactics.

The day came when Pastor Wurmbrand faced perhaps his greatest temptation. Taken out of his cell, they escorted him, blindfolded, to a distant part of the prison. He thought that perhaps they were finally taking him to be executed. Instead they led him into a room to speak with General Negrea, Romania's Deputy-Minister of the Interior. Richard recounted what happened in his own words:

When the door opened, I was led into the presence of a man in a general's uniform. It was Negrea, the Deputy-Minister of the Interior, whose intelligence was matched by the energy burning in his strong, gypsy face. The political officer and some officials from Bucharest sat beside him. Negrea said politely, "I've been studying your case, Mr. Wurmbrand. I don't care for your views, but I like a man who sticks to his guns. We Communists are obstinate, too. I've often been in prison myself and plenty was done to make me change my mind, but I stood firm.

"I believe it's time we met half-way. If you're prepared to forget what you've suffered, we'd forget what you've done against us. We could turn the page and become friends instead of enemies. So far from acting against your own convictions, you could act upon them and still enter a period of fruitful co-operation.

A file lay open before him. "I've even read your sermons. The explanations of the Bible are beautifully put, but you must realize we live in a scientific age."

"What now?" I asked myself, as Negrea went into the Party's science lecture. Had an important minister come 200 miles for this?

Like the Danube, which twists and turns through the plains but reaches the sea at last, his discourse came to an end.

"We need men like you! We don't want people to join us out of opportunism, but because they see the fallacies in their past thinking. If you are prepared to help us in the struggle against superstition, you can start a new life at once. You will have a post with a high salary and your family around you again in comfort and in safety. What do you say?"

I replied that I found joy in the life I was already leading; but as for helping the Party, I had thought of a way of doing so if I were released.

The political officer sat up. Negrea said, "You mean you'll work for us?"

"I suggest that you send me from town to town and village to village along with the best Marxist teacher you have. First I shall expose my ignorance and the stupidities of my retrograde Christian religion; then your Marxist can explain his theories and the people will be able to make up their own minds between the two."

Negrea gave me a hard stare. "You're provoking us, Mr. Wurmbbrand. That is what I like about you. It's just the way we Communists used to answer the bosses in the old days. So let's not argue. I'll make you a better proposal still. Nobody wants you to become an atheist propagandist. If you're really so attached to an outworn faith—though I can't understand how a cultured man can accept such nonsense—then keep to it. But also keep in mind that we have the power! Communism has conquered a third of the world; the Church must come to terms with us.

"Let's put our cards on the table, for once. Frankly we're tired of Church leaders who do everything in the eyes of the people; they're no longer in touch with what's going on."

One by one, Negrea listed the remaining bishops. All were powerless, he said, or Party men; and everybody knew it.

"Now if a man like you became a bishop you could have your faith and still be loyal to the regime. Your Bible says you should submit to authority because it comes from God, so why not to ours?"

I said nothing. Negrea asked the other officials to leave us alone for a moment. He was convinced that I would accept the offer, and gave me his confidence on something he did not want the others to hear.

"The Party made a mistake," he began, "in attacking your World Council of Churches. It began as a spy-ring; but the pastors concerned are often of proletarian origin; they aren't shareholders, so to speak, but superior servants. Instead of opposing such men we should win them over to our side so that the council itself becomes our instrument."

He leaned over the desk. "Mr. Wurmbbrand, this is where you can help. You've worked for the World Council of Churches. You're known widely abroad: we still get many enquiries about you. If you became a bishop, you could help our other WCC allies to build a bulwark for us—not of atheism, but of Socialism and peace. Surely you recognize the universal idealism behind our campaigns to ban the bomb and outlaw war? And you'll be able to worship to your heart's content: there we won't interfere."

I thought for a moment.

"How far must this co-operation go? Bishops who worked with you in the past have had to inform on their own priests. Will I be expected to do that, too?"

Negrea began to laugh. "You'd be under no special obligation by virtue of your office," he said. "Everyone who knows of any act which may harm the State is obliged to denounce the man who does, and as a bishop you'll certainly hear such things.

"The present Lutheran Bishop of Romania is very old. You'd be Bishop-elect and effective Head of your Church in Romania from the start."

I asked for time to reflect and Negrea agreed.

"We'll meet before I leave again for Bucharest to put your release papers through," he said.

I was taken back to an isolation cell and lay thinking for many hours, I remembered the old Jewish story of another man who asked for time to think: a rabbi, facing the Inquisition, who was asked to deny his faith. Next morning the rabbi said, "I will not turn Catholic, but I make one last request—that before I'm burned at the stake my tongue should be cut out for not replying at once. To such a question 'No' was the only answer."

But that was only one side of the case: on the other, I knew that the official church in a Communist country can survive only through some compromise; even by paying taxes to an atheist state a Christian compromises. It was easy to say the Church could go "underground," but an underground Church needs cover for its work. Lacking this cover, millions of people would be left with nowhere to meet for worship, no pastor to preach, no one to baptize them, marry them, bury their dead—an unthinkable alternative, when I could help to avoid it by saying a few words in favor of collectivization or the so-called peace campaigns.

And then, I had not seen my wife and child for years; I did not know if they were alive. The political officer had said that Sabina was in prison; what would become of her and Mihai if I refused this proposal?

I needed strength from above to say no, when doing so meant serving eleven years more, with the sacrifice of my family and almost certain death under terrible conditions; but at that moment God's face was veiled and my faith failed me. I saw before me the huge shape of communism which already covered so much of the world and threatened to cover the rest as well; and my imagination was overcome by the danger of dying, and being beaten again and again, and the hunger and privations to which I was condemning my wife and son. My soul was like a ship driven from side to side, rocked by a violent tempest, one moment plunged into the abyss, the next carried up to Heaven. I drank in those hours the cup of Christ; it was for me the Garden of Gethsemane. And like Jesus, I threw myself with face upon the earth and prayed with broken cries, and asked God to help me overcome this horrible temptation.

After prayer, I felt a little quieter. But still I saw before me Nichefor Daianu and Radu Ghinda and so many more who had harmed the faith, including the Patriarch; they numbered thousands, and now I had become a man mean in faith, and I would be swallowed up like them for my weakness of the flesh. I began to think carefully of all the times I had argued the truth of Christianity. I repeated to myself the simplest questions. Is the way of

love better than hatred? Has Christ lifted the burden of sin and doubt from my shoulders? Is He the Savior? There was no difficulty eventually in answering "Yes." And when I had done so, it was as if a great weight had been removed from my mind.

For an hour I lay on my bed, saying to myself, "I shall try now not to think of Christ." But the effort failed: I could think of nothing else. There was a void in my heart without Christianity. For a last time my mind went to Negrea's proposal. I thought of the tyrants from Nebuchadnezzar who set a king over the Jews, to Hitler who set his puppets over Europe. My visiting card would read "Richard Wurmbrand, Lutheran Bishop of Romania, by appointment of the Secret Police." I would not be a bishop of Christ in a holy place, but a police spy in a state institution.

I prayed again, and afterwards I felt tranquility of soul.

Next day I was called again. Commandant Alexandrescu was there, among several others around Negrea, and when I said I could not accept, the whole question was argued again. Only when we reached the subject of the World Council of Churches did Negrea once more ask the rest to leave. Then he urged me to reconsider my refusal.

I said, "I don't feel worthy to be a bishop—I wasn't worthy to be a pastor, and even to be a simple Christian was too great for me. The first Christians went to their deaths saying 'Christianus sumi'—I'm a Christian!—and I haven't done that; instead, I considered your shameful offer. But I cannot accept it."

"We'll find another who will," he warned.

I replied, "If you believe you can prove that I'm wrong, bring me your atheist arguments! I have the arguments for my faith and I seek only the truth."

He asked me, "You know, of course, what this will mean for your future?"

"I have considered well, and weighed the dangers, and I rejoice to suffer for what I am sure is the last truth."¹⁵⁰

Matthew 10:21,22

In verse 21, the disciples were undoubtedly startled to learn that the persecution would come not only from governmental authorities—even their own families would reject them. In societies where family loyalty and parental honor were paramount (like the Jewish society), these words must have sounded unbelievably harsh, though they originally came from Micah 7:6: *"Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death"* (Matthew 10:21).

These are hard words for us to hear as well. Most cultures put an incredible value on the family and so it is hard to hear the truth "that the family is not God's most important institution on earth. The family is not the most significant social agency that makes and shapes and forms the character of Christians. The family is

not the primary vehicle of God's grace and salvation for a world on the edge of despair."¹⁵¹

Instead, from a biblical perspective, the Church is to be God's most important gathering on earth. The Church is God's principal agent of change in the world, the primary vehicle of the good news of God's gift of grace and salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As John Calvin wrote, "After God has once received us into his family, it is not only that he may regard us in the light of servants, but of sons, performing the part of a kind and anxious parent, and providing for our maintenance during the whole course of our lives."¹⁵²

Brett Webb-Mitchell writes:

What Jesus did in his ministry was nothing less than reconfigure how we are to understand ourselves and our biological kith and kin. In Mark 3:31–35, Jesus tells those assembled before him that his primary family was not composed of genetically-alike ancestors but of those who shared his obedient spirit. Telling his disciples and followers that those already in front of him were his "mother and brothers and sisters" was not a denial of the importance of his biological family. Instead, what Jesus did was to transform our perception of family away from our mere biological and adoptive heritage and toward the broader context of the household of God. Jesus greatly expands our lineage, calls us to new relationships with certain responsibilities and accountability to one another.¹⁵³

In Jesus' eyes, however good the family may be, it is not sacred. Like possessions, reputation, and religion itself, the family is clearly subordinated to the mission of the kingdom.¹⁵⁴ The demands of following Christ and entering a new family will be a strain on one's familial loyalties. As in Matthew 5:10–12, Jesus reminds His disciples in 10:22 that "*you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*"

In the face of this often intensely personal hatred and rejection, the disciples would undoubtedly be greatly tempted to apostatize and be saved from such hostility and danger. Jesus reminds them, however, that only if they endure will they be delivered. The word "saved" in verse 22 clearly cannot refer to the preservation or protection of physical life or health since some believers are martyred for their faith. So what does Jesus refer to here?

Craig Blomberg in his commentary on Matthew writes,

Jesus offers a sober reminder that the true colors of our faith may become visible only when our lives are on the line (as in the situation facing the readers of Hebrews; cf. also 1 Pet 1:1; Jas 1:2–4). The "end" most naturally refers to the end

of the age but would also include the moment of death for those who do not live to see Christ return.¹⁵⁵

The expression “to the end” is idiomatic for “completely, entirely, wholly”—referring to the entire duration of the hostility however it may end. This same phraseology appears in Mark 13:13 and Luke 21:19. In Luke, Jesus says:

“You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives.”
(Luke 21:17–19)

The point that Jesus is making in Luke 21 is that persecution cannot really separate the disciples from the care of God.¹⁵⁶ This does not negate the fact that they will suffer, but they will not ultimately be destroyed (perish). Endurance is evidence of a continuing trust in God. As Luke 12:36 reads, *“But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”*

The emphasis in all the Gospels is on the need of the disciple to hold fast to the end. There will be no salvation to the one who gives up or does not avail himself of the power of God’s Spirit (Matthew 10:19).¹⁵⁷ We may argue whether Jesus is truly saying here that a true disciple would ever fail to endure. Undoubtedly, persecution will expose faith that is only that of mental assent.¹⁵⁸

But it does seem to me that the warning given here is stronger than that—that apostasy is held out to be a distinct possibility. As I. Howard Marshall puts it, “We have no right to deny its existence in the interests of a preconceived theory.”¹⁵⁹ Indeed, warning those who do not have faith to hold on to it seems somehow dishonest. They would not have been saved in the end anyway, regardless of whether there had been persecution!

The threat in this passage is that Jesus’ disciples will see the danger that they face as too much to endure and that the only hope of preservation is to give in. Jesus reminds them that the exact opposite is true.

Matthew 10:23–25

In verse 23, Jesus gives His followers leave to flee from persecution. This surprises some people. But this is an option for the disciples. The promise of verse 23 is that the Church will never be wiped out. The gates of Hell will not prevail.

The hostile reception that they will receive because of the message that Jesus has entrusted to them should not be surprising:

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.” (Matthew 10:24,25)

Jesus said it more plainly in John 15:20:

“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 also keep yours.”

Biblical Responses to Persecution

Biblically, there seem to be three basic responses that the Lord allows when His people are persecuted:

1. Flight

There is a biblical permission to flee from persecution (see Matthew 10:23; Acts 8:1; 9:25; 14:5,6; 2 Corinthians 11:32,33). The motive behind the fleeing, however, is what is critical. If it were primarily to avoid suffering, then this would not be a sufficient reason. Throughout the New Testament, the priority is always on the mission of the kingdom of God above all else: family, possessions, personal safety, to name a few.

However, if the mission were threatened by persecution, withdrawal was permitted.

- a) Matthew 23:10: withdrawal to another city in order that the gospel may continue to spread (see Acts 8:1).
- b) Acts 9:25; 2 Corinthians 11:23,24: In Corinthians, Paul refers to this fleeing as part of his catalog of suffering for Christ. The flight was not, therefore, a flight from suffering, but a flight in order to fulfill the mission of Christ. While God’s Word can go out forcefully through the testimony of martyrdom, it is sometimes better that people remain alive in order to proclaim it (see Acts 14:5,6).
- c) The example of Jesus: While there were times that Jesus hid Himself (John 8:59; Matthew 12:14,15), this hiding was because *“his time had not yet come”* (John 7:30; 8:20; 10:39). His escape from suffering and death was, however, only a postponement. His mission must be preserved (see Matthew 2:13ff), a mission that culminates in His suffering and death.

Nevertheless, Jesus did not pull away from confrontations with the religious leaders of his day. His ministry was not characterized by “tactical moves,” compromise, a watering-down of his message, or avoidance of suffering. He was not a hireling who flees in the time of peril (John 10:12), but a good Shepherd whose main concern is not His own safety but

the safety of others and who lays down His life for His flock. This is expected of His followers as well (John 15:13,14).

Flight is forbidden where obedience to God's commandments and Christ's commission and love for others would be jeopardized. The avoidance of distress and pain is not the supreme good. Obedience is, regardless of the cost.

When persecution arises, careful consideration must be given to determine whether or not suffering is necessary in order to accomplish the will of God.

2. Fortitude

Jesus' instructions to "stay in Jerusalem" in Acts 2 were not easy to follow; Jerusalem was the most dangerous place to be.

Fortitude is, by far, the most common response to persecution given, but should not be seen in isolation from the others. The attitudes expressed here should exemplify believers regardless of whether they flee or fight. Flight may, at times, be impossible, impractical, or inappropriate. In these cases, God's people are called to stand firm where they are and remain faithful, even unto death.

3. Fight

There are times when it is appropriate to fight for one's legal rights. Paul did so on several occasions (Acts 16:37; 22:24ff; 25:10,11). Like fleeing, fighting is permissible unless it hinders the furtherance of the kingdom of God (contra Jesus who was silent at his trial). In Paul's case, it could be argued that he defended his legal rights in order to further the kingdom of God. It is worth noting that even Jesus defended Himself at one point during his trial (John 18:23), not to protest his suffering but as a testimony of his innocence.

Civil disobedience, within appropriate guidelines, is also an option to the believer.¹⁶⁰

Matthew 10:26,27

Having reminded them that persecution is an expected part of being His disciple, Jesus continues in verses 26,27:

"So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops." (Matthew 10:26,27)

A few verses earlier, in Matthew 10:22, the Lord reminded His disciples that the hatred of the world was "on account of my name." The disciples would be hated by the world because they faithfully follow Christ and His teaching.

How were they to respond? Fleeing was one option. But in the face of possible annihilation, surely there had to be other responses. The temptation, of course, would be to duck down and try not to get noticed, to keep quiet and perhaps be a follower of Jesus "in my heart," or to be a Christian in secret.

But Jesus does not leave that possibility open to His disciples when He gives them this command: “*What I tell you in the darkness, speak in the light; and what you hear whispered in your ear, proclaim upon the housetops*” (10:27).

It is hard not to fear the threats of persecutors. It is far easier to declare, “I am not a Christian.” It is even easier to deny Christ by simply keeping silent or by staying hidden. In the midst of persecution, however, only two options are open to the follower of Christ: either confess Him or deny Him (either actively or passively).

As sheep are sent out to the wolves, it is imperative that they understand why they are going: they go to bear witness to the life-changing message of Jesus Christ. They do not go in order to survive. Indeed, they may *not* survive, but survival is not the critical concern. They go to bear witness. God’s messengers cannot be silent. They can only be silenced.¹⁶¹

Indeed, as Jesus will say in the next verse (verse 28), it is not the persecutors that one should really fear.

Matthew 10:28–32

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28)

Bonhoeffer wrote concerning this passage:

The danger lies not in the judgment of men, but in the judgment of God, not in the death of the body, but in the eternal destruction of body and soul. Those who are still afraid of men have no fear of God, and those who have fear of God have ceased to be afraid of men. All preachers of the gospel will do well to recollect this saying daily.¹⁶²

There are two crucial facts from this passage that the followers of Jesus must understand:¹⁶³

1. The power of the killers is limited; they can only kill the body. Ultimately, God will bring the body back to life, and so the power that our persecutors wield over us is temporal at best. Ultimately, not a single hair of our head will perish (John 21:18).
2. The real threat of persecution is not that we might suffer and die, but that we might fail to be what the Almighty God expects us to be. As a Vietnamese pastor once shared with some of my colleagues, “Suffering is not the worst thing that can happen to us. Disobedience to God is!” The one we should really fear is

God, the Sovereign over the entire earth, who sustains and cares for all of creation (verses 29–31). If He can do that, He can care for you (an echo of Job).

Matthew 10:33–42

In verses 33–42, there are four dangers that face the believer in the time of persecution:

1. The danger of denying Christ (verse 33)
2. The danger of loving one's family more than Christ (verses 34–37)
3. The danger of loving one's own life more than Christ and thus not being prepared to lose it for Christ's sake (verses 38,39)
4. The danger of refusing to receive those who, because of their witness, are wanted by authorities or mobs (verses 40–42)

Persecution is dangerous ground, yet more perilous is the possibility of failing to be what God expects us to be by denying Him.

In verse 38 Jesus introduces a new element to His disciples for the first time, an element that I suspect stunned the disciples. It is one thing to talk about suffering, sacrifice, and death, but Jesus suddenly makes it very concrete by mentioning something that no one in the first century wanted to contemplate—*the cross*.

“And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”
(Matthew 10:38)

The price of suffering, sacrifice, and death just became significantly higher. In chapter 16, Jesus will return to this theme and develop it further.

Matthew 16:21–28

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24)

We discussed the context of this verse earlier, and so we will not return to that discussion.¹⁶⁴ The key question that stands before us is, *What exactly is the cross that the follower of Jesus is called to carry?*

In the plan of God, what does the cross of the believer accomplish? We know what the cross of Christ achieved—the propitiation of our sins. What do our crosses accomplish, however, within God's plan?

Please remember that Jesus does not call us to carry *His* cross. He calls us to bend over and pick up our own cross and follow Him. But shouldn't we know the meaning of our own cross?

The Meaning of the Cross

What is worth noting is that the call here is not simply an exhortation for the disciple to be prepared for death by crucifixion. Instead, as L. W. Hurtado points out, the cross is “held out precisely as the criterion for being a disciple of Jesus.”¹⁶⁵ Cross-bearing is presented as being indicative of the level of life-commitment that will be necessary to be a follower of Jesus.

Every first-century person knew what a cross was—a Roman instrument of torture and execution for convicted criminals. The first-century Greek philosopher Plutarch wrote that “every criminal who is executed carries his own cross.”

Unfortunately, I suspect the sense that the early church had of this saying is largely lost on us today. The “cross” of the believer has been trivialized into meaning pretty much anything that is unpleasant. But this is not the meaning that *Jesus* had when He said these words!

The “cross” is not ordinary human troubles and sorrows such as disappointments, disease, death, poverty, and the like.¹⁶⁶ Nor, on the other hand, is the phrase “taking up the cross” to be completely spiritualized, like too many have done. Having never had to suffer persecution, we take the phrase and give it some mystical, existential meaning that is totally removed from the reality of first-century Christianity (and that faced by persecuted Christians around the world). Such examples of this would be referring to carrying the cross as “dying to self,” “self-denial,” or “giving everything to God,” as important as these concepts are. The important thing for us to understand in this study is, What did *Jesus* mean and how would the *disciples* have understood it?

As we studied earlier, the context is that of Jesus declaring that He would need to go to Jerusalem and die in order to accomplish the purposes of God. Finding the disciples (Peter in particular) resistant to that concept, Jesus turned to them and said that this is how God’s purposes will be accomplished through them as well.

If they are going to follow Him, Jesus told them, the disciples must deny themselves, renouncing their right to life, take up their cross and follow Him on the same path to death. They must be prepared every day to face death in their allegiance to their Master, after His example. Even more than that, they throw themselves into the purposes of God to such an extent that sacrifice at any level becomes the accepted norm. This is the cost of following Christ.

In verse 24, the disciples were called to carry out the same kind of ministry that Jesus was beginning.¹⁶⁷ As noted earlier,¹⁶⁸ the use of the phrase ἀπο; το;ε ἵπχατο ο; ἄἰησου” in 16:21 coincides with the use of the phrase in 4:17, after which Jesus called His disciples to “fish for men” (16:24–28). Having called His disciples to be

fishers of men, He instructed them in its cost—a readiness to suffer a martyr’s death, like a condemned criminal.

To the early disciples, the cross meant two things:

1. Crucifixion was a terrifying, disgusting, unspeakably horrifying, and shameful way to die. The Roman philosopher Seneca advised suicide rather than face the agonies involved.¹⁶⁹ To be called to take up the cross required a readiness to face that sort of fate for the sake of Christ.
2. Crucifixion was administered solely as a state punishment. It was not carried out by mobs, but the result of “due process.” So the call is beyond that of just suffering; it implied a preparation for severe social consequences, condemned as a subversive or criminal of the worst kind.

This is the kind of serious commitment to which all disciples—including you and me—are called: a readiness to face whatever consequences and costs there may be to following Jesus. This is the criterion for following Jesus in the first place.

We need to take Jesus’ words very literally. The demand of Jesus is to tread the path of martyrdom. He was about to send His disciples out as sheep among wolves and He had already told them that they would likely die in the process of carrying out their ministry.

In order to build His Church (16:18), His death was necessary, as He points out in 16:21. This is the foundation. Without Christ’s death there is no redeemed community. But just as Christ’s cross was needed to establish His Church, our crosses are needed to build His Church. In order to accomplish Jesus’ plan to build His Church, both crosses are needed. There is no better way to put it than to follow the lead of Josef Ton: “*Christ’s cross was for propitiation. Our cross is for propagation.*”¹⁷⁰

Christ’s cross gives us the message that He has redeemed us and offers new life to all who trust in Him. Our cross is necessary if we are to take this message out into a hostile world that rejects Him and His message. But by our deaths, the message is spread. This is the cause for which Jesus calls us to suffer and to sacrifice ourselves. This is the meaning of the cross of the disciple. In order to build His Church, Jesus needed His own cross as well as the crosses of His disciples, His death as well as theirs.

With this understanding, is it any wonder that the early church turned their world upside down? They were ready to sacrifice anything to get the message of Jesus Christ to a world for which their Lord had died. In a modern-day context, such a level of dedication may bring to mind a comparison to suicide bombers, although of course, one must not push this comparison too far. The distinction

between suicide bombers and martyrs could not be greater. Suicide bombers give their lives to kill others; martyrs die to give others life. Suicide bombers cannot be called martyrs in any true sense of the word, as martyrs are recipients of their fate; they are killed by others. Martyrdom is something that happens to those who seek to pursue the purposes of God. It is not something that they instigate. Suicide bombers, on the other hand, are inherently proactive in seeking their own death in order to advance their cause. Both, however, are prepared to pay any cost to accomplish their priorities, even their own lives.

As we read of how the early church sacrificially took the gospel to the ends of the known world, it is obvious that the disciples held their own lives very loosely, as they remembered their Lord's words:

*“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will **repay each person** according to what he has done.”* (Matthew 16:25–27, emphasis added)

Rewards in Heaven

One of the themes that many Protestant Christians are uncomfortable with is the concept of rewards for faithfulness. Some seem to be under the impression that to be rewarded contradicts or diminishes grace.¹⁷¹

However, the concept that believers will receive rewards from God is mentioned consistently throughout Scripture, especially in passages that talk about persecution. This knowledge provides Christians with tremendous motivation to follow Christ even to death, knowing that their sacrifice would be rewarded with very real and very great rewards from the hand of God. We are assured that as we store up riches in heaven, someday we will actually receive them. We are promised an inheritance that, by our sacrifice and faithfulness to God, has demonstrated that we are trustworthy, able to fulfill the responsibilities God plans to give us in heaven.¹⁷²

We will all enter into eternal life, but the rewards that we receive will be in accordance to the worthiness that we have demonstrated in our service to Him; He will know that we can be trusted to serve Him faithfully in much, because we have demonstrated faithfulness to Him here on earth with comparatively little. By enduring hardship now, we are receiving the training that we need to fulfill the tasks which God will entrust to us in eternity.

Salvation is still all of grace, because God's grace is not only a saving grace but an enabling grace; His rewards will be given to those who have availed themselves of the grace that He has so lavishly supplied.¹⁷³ Additionally, as Kenneth Kirk states, it

is worth noting that “Jesus constantly promised reward only to those who were prepared to follow and obey Him from some other motive.”¹⁷⁴ Even in the great summons of Christ to renounce all and to take up the cross, the motive for the renunciations is not for the reward, but for “*my sake and the gospel’s*” (Mark 10:29). To renounce this world simply for the reward’s sake would be to forfeit the reward itself.

It is only those whose minds are set on God and His purposes who are able to avoid two opposite but equally dangerous errors:

- The error of seeking to earn God’s favor through one’s own efforts or living sacrificially in order to gain reward
- The error of thinking that one can achieve favor with God through the pursuit of introspective self-scrutiny and self-discipline¹⁷⁵

The focus of the cross-bearing Christian is not on the sacrifice or the selflessness of the action or the purity of motive but on Christ and His purposes. Done in this spirit, the believer will often be unaware of his actions (Matthew 25:31–46), convinced that he is only doing his duty (Luke 17:10), thankful to God for His grace and generosity.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16)

Despite its context of affirming that “*many who are first will be last, and the last first*” (19:30; 20:16), this parable has frequently been used to “prove” that there will be no degrees of reward in heaven but that everyone will receive the same pay. However, recall the context as to why Jesus told the parable in the first place. The rich young ruler had just walked away because he considered the cost of following Jesus too great. Peter, on the other hand, has realized that he and the other disciples had done what the rich young man was unable to do and so he asked Jesus what their gain would be as a result (19:27). Jesus replies that at the renewal of all things, when He would sit on His glorious throne, they would reign with Him. In addition, “*everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first*” (19:29,30). He then tells the parable of the workers in the vineyard and concludes with the words, “*So the last will be first, and the first last*” (20:16).

The emphasis of the parable is found in the last sentence (20:15)—the master’s generosity.¹⁷⁶ The owner of the vineyard is unquestionably the central figure in the parable. Seeing the parable in its context, it seems to me that the disciples cannot be those who

have labored all day but those who have come later. The disciples are told that the reward they receive from God will not be that of deserved payment for their work, but a hundred times greater than the service done.¹⁷⁷ The Owner of the vineyard is generous beyond words and is free to do whatever He wishes with His own goods. He will give to those who have sacrificially served Him much more than they expected. God will still pay the one who has only worked for Him for a fixed price, as is just, but God is more than just. He is outrageously generous with His rewards. Ton states: "In the final reckoning, His way of assessing the work of each laborer will result in the fact that ones who seemed to be first will be last and the ones who seemed to be last will be first."¹⁷⁸

Not Tasting Death Until Seeing the Son of Man

Jesus concludes His teaching on the cross of the disciples with one of the most cryptic promises in the Bible. Seen in the context of persecution, however, I believe the meaning becomes clear:

"Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matthew 16:28)

There are an incredible number of interpretations of this verse. Some see it as a promise of the soon coming of Jesus (within the lifetime of the disciples). Others as the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection, or Pentecost. Some see it as being fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. If we keep in mind, however, that this whole passage is a systematic teaching for those training for martyrdom, another more suitable interpretation may be possible.

Jesus was speaking to a group of people who were literally going to die for Him and for His gospel. Apart from Judas (and tradition tells us, John), all the disciples suffered horrible persecution and died a martyr's death.¹⁷⁹

Speaking to this group of people who would sooner or later die as martyrs, He ends the discussion with a tremendous promise that said in effect, "Before you go to your martyrdom, I promise you that I will grant you a vision of Myself in my royal glory."¹⁸⁰

Shortly after this promise, Jesus was seen in His heavenly glory in the Transfiguration (chapter 17), and so it is possible that He is referring to that event. A better interpretation may be to see this promise fulfilled in the Ascension in Matthew 28:18 when Jesus shows Himself to His disciples and declares that "*all authority has been given to me in heaven and earth.*"

An admittedly more novel interpretation but one that warrants consideration is to see Jesus' promise fulfilled in the experience of Stephen when Luke tells us that

he, *“full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55,56).*¹⁸¹

At the moment of his martyrdom, Stephen sees the Son of Man in His royal glory. At that moment, the ferocity of his torturers no longer mattered. The suffering faded. All he saw was Jesus.

Ton correctly notes:

Across the centuries, many Christians who were faced with the frightening prospect of suffering and martyrdom were given this vision of the glory of Jesus. Their testimonies attest to the fact that this experience changed their whole attitude and helped them to meet their martyrdom with composure, with joy, and yes, even with passion.¹⁸²

Surely, He is with us always, even to the end of the age!

Mark

It is important to remember that each of the Gospels was written at a different time to a particular audience with a special emphasis, due to the circumstances of place and time. Tradition has it that Mark's Gospel was written for the people in Rome under the influence of Peter. Mark's was the first Gospel to develop, and was written about 30 years after the crucifixion of Jesus and around the time of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Mark's Gospel emphasizes discipleship and its cost. To believe in Jesus and to be found in His company means to take seriously the words of Jesus to deny one's very self, to take up the cross and follow Him (8:34). It means to realize that to save one's life is to lose it and to lose one's life for the sake of the gospel is to find it (8:35–37). In a Gospel where there is continual motion, the cross and resurrection are the climax of the story of Jesus. Everything Jesus said and did led up to His passion.

And just as for Jesus, so for His followers. The way of the cross is their path too. Its pain and trial is the only way to glory. Jesus leads His disciples to accept the demands of the cross. Jesus teaches the disciples how they are to differ radically from others in their society and culture. They are not to act on ambition and seek after power but, like Jesus, they are to be those who serve, attentive especially to those in misery and need. For Mark, there is no safe and easy way to be a follower of Jesus, the Crucified One.

Unlike Matthew or Luke, Mark does not provide us with “the euphoria of the infancy narratives.”¹⁸³ He begins abruptly and bluntly with John the Baptist in the

desert shouting that there is “one mightier than I in your midst who will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.”

Then just as starkly, Jesus appears in order to be baptized (1:9–11) and is immediately sent into the wilderness to be tempted and to face the dangers of wild animals (1:12,13).

Almost immediately, the one who had prepared the way for Jesus is thrown into prison (1:14). Jesus picks up exactly where John left off except that His message is that the time John said was on the horizon has now arrived. Jesus appears in Galilee proclaiming the good news of God saying, “This is the time of fulfillment . . . The reign of God is at hand. Turn your lives around and believe in the gospel.” As Mark’s Gospel develops we read how, just as John was faithful to his calling and was arrested for it, so Jesus remains true to His calling and is crucified by those who oppose Him. Following His death, an angel appears to the women who visit His tomb after his resurrection and tells them, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7). If one accepts the shorter ending of Mark, Jesus’ mission and ministry begins and ends in Galilee and ends with a degree of uncertainty.

There is considerable debate over the textual evidence regarding the ending of Mark. The earliest manuscripts of Mark end with 16:8 with the words “*they were afraid.*”¹⁸⁴ The women fail to follow the instructions of the heavenly messenger, giving an ambiguous ending to the Gospel.¹⁸⁵ We are left to wonder, “What of the disciples? Will they obey His instructions?” If we accept the shorter ending as being the Mark’s intended one, he ends at the brink of a new beginning, but we are unsure whether it will really happen. The Gospel starts with John the Baptist pointing the way to Jesus and ends with the women refusing to tell others about Him because of fear.

It should be noted that the discussion that follows is not dependent upon the reader accepting the “shorter” ending of Mark. As we shall discover below, the actions of the women in 16:8 are consistent with the way in which Mark depicts the disciples in his Gospel. The descriptions of the disciples in the verses that appear in later manuscripts (16:9–20) are hardly more flattering. The fear that marked the women is matched by the doubt exhibited by the disciples. The disciples consistently do not believe (16:11,13). Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith and refusal to believe the testimonies of those who had witnessed His resurrection (16:14). It is worth noting that this is also consistent with how Christians throughout history (and even to the present day) respond to persecution. Some believe, others are afraid and say nothing, while still others leave the Christian fellowship entirely.

Of all the Gospel writers, Mark is by far the one who best reveals the failings of the disciples. Peter, for example, called Jesus the Messiah, but promptly revealed that he had no idea what that involved, having his own ideas about what it meant to be the anointed one of God and how Jesus should live that out. He is rebuked as being “Satan,” an adversary (8:33). Peter had to learn through experiences of failure, dismay, and even denial the real meaning of the Messiah.

The other disciples are likewise depicted rather poorly in Mark’s Gospel. They start off so well. At first the ones who oppose Jesus are His family (3:21,31–34) and the teachers of the law (3:22–30). Jesus recognized that not everyone would accept His teaching (as He explained in the Parable of the Soils in 4:1–24) and that some would fall away under persecution (4:17).

The disciples are viewed relatively positively until 6:30, even though there are difficulties (e.g., 4:13; 4:38; 5:31). But following each incident, Jesus instructs them and the problem appears to have been resolved. As time goes on, however, it is clear that they do not understand who Jesus really is. Time and again they do not grasp the meaning of what He said (4:13; 6:51,52; 7:18; 8:18,21; 8:32,33; 9:32).¹⁸⁶ They fail to cast out a demon because of their lack of faith and prayer (9:19,29). They attempt to chase away those who try to bring children to Jesus (10:13,14). They treat Jesus as if He were naïve (4:38; 5:31; 6:37). They quarrel over who is the greatest (9:33–36) and jockey for position (10:35–41). They forbid others not in their group to use Jesus’ name (9:38). Jesus begins to see a hardness in their hearts not unlike that demonstrated by His enemies (compare 3:5,6 with 6:52 and 8:17). Jesus questions whether they are capable of seeing and hearing (8:18) in a context where He has healed a deaf and blind man (7:31–37; 8:22–26). The three boat scenes depict the disciples as fearful, distrustful of Jesus, and self-concerned (4:40; 6:49,50; 8:14–16).¹⁸⁷ They fall asleep in the garden at the time of Jesus’ greatest need (14:37). Judas betrays Him, Peter denies Him, and when Jesus is arrested, they all desert Him (14:50). This is direct disobedience to the call to follow Him in suffering in 8:34–37, making the disciples liable to the judgment announced in 8:38.¹⁸⁸ It is also an explicit failure to keep their promise in 14:31. The flight of the naked young man in 14:52 “dramatizes the shameful flight and satirizes the pretensions of Christians who claim to be ready for martyrdom.”¹⁸⁹ Tannehill notes:

This interpretation may be supported by the reference to the fine linen (*sindon*) worn by the young man. Elsewhere in the New Testament the word is only used of the cloth in which Jesus was buried (see 5:46 and par.). If this detail is significant, it suggests that this man was so sure of his loyalty that he comes dressed for death, but suddenly changes his mind when death is a real prospect. His nakedness emphasizes the shameful flight.¹⁹⁰

The disciples' failure is contrasted with the behavior of others who do what they will not: Simon who must "take up"¹⁹¹ Jesus' cross (15:21), the centurion at the cross who makes the confession that Peter refused to make (15:21), and Joseph of Arimathea who cares for Jesus' burial, a task one would expect His closest friends and family would handle (15:43–47).¹⁹²

Even after the resurrection, as noted earlier, the fear that characterized the disciples remains (16:8). If one accepts the shorter ending of Mark, the story is left open-ended. Will they meet with Jesus? If one accepts the longer ending, the question is hardly different. Will they overcome their fear and doubt, and believe?

Tannehill comments:

While any positive qualities of story characters will attract, a reader will identify most easily and immediately with characters who seem to share the reader's situation.

Assuming that the majority of the first readers of the Gospel were Christians, they would relate most easily and immediately to characters in the story who respond positively to Jesus. The disciples, including the twelve, are the primary continuing characters who, at least at first, seem to respond in this way and so share this essential quality of the Christian reader's self-understanding. I believe that the author of Mark anticipated this response by his readers. He composed his story so as to make use of this initial tendency to identify with the disciples in order to speak indirectly to the reader through the disciples' story. In doing so, he first reinforces the positive view of the disciples which he anticipates from his readers, thus strengthening the tendency to identify with them. Then he reveals the inadequacy of the disciples' response to Jesus, presents the disciples in conflict with Jesus on important issues, and finally shows the disciples as disastrous failures. The surprisingly negative development of the disciples' story requires the reader to distance himself from them and their behavior. But something of the initial identification remains, for there are similarities between the problems of the disciples and problems which the first readers faced. This tension between identification and repulsion can lead the sensitive reader beyond a naively positive view of himself to self-criticism and repentance. The composition of Mark strongly suggests that the author, by the way in which he tells the disciples' story, intended to awaken his readers to their failures as disciples and call them to repentance. Allowing at first the comfortable assumption that Jesus and his disciples (and with them the Christian reader) are basically in concord, the story reveals points of essential conflict. The reader is left with a choice, a choice represented by the differing ways of Jesus and the disciples. In the light of what Jesus demands, this choice is not easy.¹⁹³

The Christians in Rome at the time of Mark's Gospel were experiencing persecution under the Emperor Titus. Some had abandoned their faith or even betrayed others. The Christians of Mark's day could likely identify with the weakness, hesitation, and unbelief of the disciples. Yet, they could also see these traits as a sign of the power of God's grace and forgiveness and as a means of hope to walk in the footsteps of Jesus even after failure. Agusti Borrell contends that Mark intended for Peter's denial to cause his readers to question their own conduct and attitudes so that they might respond more appropriately to Jesus' death than Peter and the other disciples did. Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial suggests, in Borrell's view, that failure is not the last word to be associated with the disciples, that the disciples are not ultimately discredited.¹⁹⁴ Borrell points out that when Jesus speaks of His return to Galilee, preceding His disciples (14:28), this is to be understood as a patent link to 16:7 and is a clear invitation to reunification.¹⁹⁵ For those who, like Mark (see Acts 15:38) and Peter, failed in the face of opposition, this would have provided tremendous encouragement and hope.

In chapter 13, Jesus assumes a restored relationship with those He recognizes will fail Him. Looking ahead to the future, He warns them to "watch" (13:33–37), even though He knows that they will fail to watch in Gethsemane (14:37). He warns them that they will be handed over to "councils" (13:9) just as He will be. He warns them that they will appear before governors and kings (13:9) just as He will. Even though they ran from this possibility at His passion, Mark anticipates that each reader will decide for himself how he will respond to the persecution facing him. Will he flee or obey? Will he doubt God or trust Him? The reader is left with a choice. How will his story end?¹⁹⁶

Luke

More than any of the Gospel writers, Luke stresses that true faith is characterized by "counting the cost." A disciple must recognize that to enter into a life of discipleship with Jesus, all other allegiances must be detached, giving total allegiance to Jesus as Master.¹⁹⁷ The key passage is Luke 10:25–37, where a young lawyer came to Jesus asking about how to obtain eternal life. Jesus asked him what the law said, to which he replied by referring to the commands to love in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus affirms this response, but tragically the young man was unable to make the kind of commitment that God's Word called for—undivided loyalty for God is the center of faith. To follow Christ, one must be prepared to sacrifice everything for God and others, as they walk in the Way, in the footsteps of their Master.¹⁹⁸

The Subjects of Persecution in Luke

Luke's Gospel provides the context for properly understanding the persecution that will become part of the experience of the early church in Acts. He identifies persecution against the following people:

1. **Jesus.** In Luke's Gospel, persecution, first and foremost, is directed against Jesus. As early as in the prophecy about Him by Simeon at His dedication at the temple in 2:34: "*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed*" (emphasis added).

Jesus Himself predicts His rejection and death (Luke 9:22,44; 17:25; 18:31–33). The entire ministry of Jesus is put into the context of rejection by these prophecies and is pictured by Luke as a persecution.¹⁹⁹ In the very first example of His ministry after His temptation in the wilderness (4:1–13) when Jesus returned to Nazareth, He is rejected, as the townspeople attempt to throw Him over a cliff (4:14–30). This rejection continues throughout His earthly ministry, culminating in His death. Luke carefully records that Jesus was an innocent victim killed by those who rejected His teachings and claims.

2. **His disciples.** Persecution is also directed at Jesus' disciples in Luke. While some actual persecution is implied as Jesus instructed His disciples about how to respond to persecution as they went out as His messengers (9:5; 10:3,8–16), the primary focus of the disciples' persecution was still in the future. Jesus predicted that they, like Him, would be rejected and mistreated. In 6:22 Luke provides more detail than Matthew's parallel passage in 5:11 about the nature of the persecution that His disciples would face when Jesus says that they would be hated, ostracized, reviled face-to-face, and their reputations defamed on "*account of the Son of Man.*"²⁰⁰ Varying in degree and expression, persecution of the disciples was to be expected and they were to be congratulated for the fact that their suffering was evidence that their reward would be great in heaven (6:23). It is also evidence that they are true messengers of God in direct contrast to the false prophets whom everyone speaks well of (6:26).
3. **The prophets of old.** Like in Matthew, the prophets of old, God's messengers in the past, are constantly pictured as suffering rejection and persecution by Israel (4:24; 13:34). "As such, they are the model for the persecution that Jesus will suffer (4:24–30; 13:33,34; 20:9–19) as well as the model for persecution for the disciples (6:22,23; 11:49)."²⁰¹ Those who reject Jesus and His disciples were following the identical pattern established by those who rejected the prophets.²⁰²

The Theological Teachings of Persecution in Luke

In his important study of the theology of persecution found in Luke and Acts, Scott Cunningham identifies six major theological themes in Luke's Gospel:²⁰³

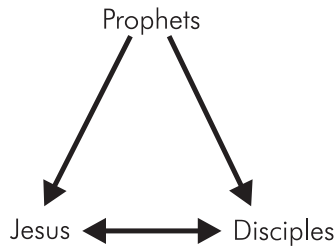
1. **Persecution is part of the plan of God.** If asked, "Why did Jesus have to be rejected, suffer persecution, and suffer death?" Luke would have answered, "It was God's plan." From the first hint of Jesus' rejection in Simeon's prophecy in 2:34 to the conclusion of the Gospel in 24:44–49, Jesus' death and persecution occurred under the direction of God's plan, according to Luke.

Repeatedly Jesus' death is said to be "necessary" (9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26,44). Luke frequently declares that Jesus' death fulfilled Scripture (18:31–34; 22:37; 24:25–27,44–46). God's will is communicated in Scripture and must be fulfilled. Luke typically does not resort to quoting actual biblical verses, although he does do that in Luke 20:17 and 22:37. His appeal is to the general teaching of Scripture that the Servant-Messiah must die (24:25,44). The actual passages are not so important to Luke as the biblical patterns that Jesus fulfills.²⁰⁴ Seeing how persecution is part of the plan of God, the reader is assured that the prophecies that Jesus makes concerning His disciples and how they too will be persecuted are also within the will and plan of God.

2. **Persecution is the rejection of God's agents.** Those who persecute God's agents in Luke are, ironically, those who are supposed to be God's people. The rejection of Jesus is seen as a developing storyline, prophesied in the temple at His dedication; it begins as soon as He embarks on His public ministry in Nazareth, increases in intensity in the narrative, and comes to fruition in the plot of the religious leadership to kill Him (22:2). The cross is seen as the final materialization of the rejection that Jesus experiences in the whole of His ministry. He lives constantly under the shadow of the cross.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus sees His rejection as being consistent with how God's agents have always been treated by those who are supposed to be God's people. He sees that this pattern will continue through the rejection of His disciples as they carry on His ministry after His resurrection. In fact, being well-spoken of is a basis for judgment, for this is how false prophets were treated (6:26).

3. **The persecuted stand in continuity with God's prophets.** There is in Luke what Cunningham calls a "persecutional interlock."²⁰⁵ The prophets, Jesus, and the disciples are all related to each other in persecution. This triangle of persecution is carefully worked out in the Gospel.



Jesus and the disciples are persecuted just as the prophets were before them. The prophets were persecuted for being God’s messengers just as Jesus and the disciples are. The disciples are persecuted because of Jesus and it was because Jesus was persecuted that the disciples would be persecuted in the future.

4. **Persecution is an integral consequence of following Jesus.** In Luke 6:22 Jesus says that the disciples would be persecuted “*because of the Son of Man.*” Persecution comes to the followers of Jesus not *despite* their association with Him but *because* of it. Such persecution is inevitable. Jesus prophesies that “*they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake*” (21:12).

A few verses later, He warns them of what they could expect from a variety of sources (even family) saying, “*You will be hated by all for my name’s sake*” (21:17, emphasis added).

The references to the cross in Luke 9:23 and 14:27 link discipleship with “following after Jesus.” In 9:23 Jesus says that the disciple must daily renew an attitude of saying “no” even to one’s own life. This is the criterion of what it takes to become a follower of Jesus. It is not a “once-for all” decision. Day by day, followers must recommit themselves to the path of Christ, of being ready to suffer for His sake. Daily, one must be ready to die for the sake of one’s allegiance to Christ. The one who would follow Jesus must be prepared to share in His fate, following His pattern.

In another ironic twist in Luke’s account, a total stranger, Simon of Cyrene (though he did not volunteer for this role but was coerced), becomes an illustration of one who follows after Jesus, bearing a cross (23:26), while the leading apostle, Peter, becomes an illustration of one who does not (22:54–62).

In two other major passages, Jesus predicts that His followers will face intense persecution in the future (12:4–12; 21:12–19). As readers of Luke see Jesus’ pre-

diction of His own suffering fulfilled, they enter into reading Acts with anticipation that they will also see Jesus' prediction fulfilled concerning His disciples.²⁰⁶ It is inevitable and an integral part of following Jesus.

5. **Persecution is the occasion of divine triumph.** Although persecution is an integral part of being Jesus' disciple, divine assistance in the midst of persecution is also expected in Luke's Gospel. An angel strengthens Jesus in the garden as He faces the cross (22:43). In 10:19 Jesus tells His disciples, "*Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.*" Similarly in 21:17,18 He says, "*You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish.*"

This promise must be interpreted in light of Jesus' prediction in 21:12,16 that the disciples would be mistreated and even put to death. Cunningham argues (I think correctly) that Luke probably had two thoughts in mind: 1) God can and often will miraculously protect and deliver the disciple from physical harm, but God's promise is not limited to that. We must also recognize the fact that 2) God can give ultimate deliverance from the powers of evil. The disciple is not to fear those who can kill the body but fear Him who has the power to throw one into hell (12:4,5).²⁰⁷ Ultimately, the fate of the disciples lies not in the hands of the persecutors but of God.

Divine assistance is also promised in the disciple's defense before public authorities, whether they be religious (12:11,12) or civic (21:10–15) leaders:

"And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." (12:11,12)

"You will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict." (21:10–15)

6. **Persecution is the occasion for the Christian's perseverance.** The primary purpose of the teaching of persecution in Luke is the need for the disciple to persevere in his allegiance to Jesus in the midst of persecution. It is the seed in the good soil that perseveres in time of testing (8:15). The test of persecution is whether or not the disciples will acknowledge Him before men or deny Him (12:8–10). Only the one who endures will gain his life (21:19).

In this regard, Peter serves as a negative example of how *not* to respond in the face of persecution, as he denies his Lord in spite of his declaration in 22:33: “*Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.*” Luke’s Gospel, however, also uniquely records how the Lord appeared to Peter separately (24:34), pointing out God’s willingness to extend forgiveness and restoration to those who sincerely repent (22:62).

John

John’s Gospel is unique in that we are told exactly why it was written: “*These were written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in His name*” (John 20:31). While many conclude that John wrote this letter as an evangelistic document, this is by no means certain. M. M. Thompson notes that “the statement that the Gospel was written in order ‘that you may believe’ can also be rendered, ‘that you may continue to believe,’ and much of the Gospel seems designed to encourage believers to persevere in their faith.”²⁰⁸ John seems to have written down what he thought second and third generations of believers who had never seen His signs would need to know about Jesus in order to encourage and strengthen their faith in Him.²⁰⁹ Those who doubted were to hear the words of Jesus to Thomas, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” (20:29). To the one who perhaps had failed to believe in the face of opposition, John provides the story of Peter’s restoration in chapter 21. The reader sees that it is Jesus who seeks out Peter. It is Jesus who initiates the questions that lead to Peter’s restoration to loving fellowship with Him and recommits Peter to the purposes of God—purposes that will ultimately lead to his death (20:18,19). It is Jesus who will never fail to restore the disciple who responds to His call, “*Follow me*” (20:19) with a repentant heart seeking a new start.

From the first chapter, John notes that Jesus came into the world but the world rejected Him (1:10,11). Yet, there were those who accepted Him (1:12,13). Hence, John ordinarily sees people in one of two camps: the disciples who accept Him and abide in Him, and the “world” which includes all those who reject, oppose, or are indifferent to Him.

However, John also introduces a third group: those who begin to follow Jesus, but whose faith is deficient. They believe only because of the miracles, and Jesus does not entrust Himself to them (2:23–25). In John 6:60–66, a number of disciples turn back and no longer follow Jesus after He gives a particularly difficult teaching that they find too hard to accept. Wilkins notes:

These disciples apparently were following Jesus because He was a new miracle-worker and teacher and, as in John 2:23–25, Jesus recognized the deficiency of

their belief. They had some kind of commitment to Jesus, but when His teaching did not conform to their expectations, they left him.²¹⁰

Perhaps the difficulty centered around Jesus' demand that the only source of life that the disciple can find is in Him. The disciple cannot just add Jesus to his life; Jesus must be the center. He makes claims of loyalty that only God can lay claim to, and to some, this was too high a price to pay. As Peter replied when Jesus asked if the Twelve would also leave Him, "*Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life and we have believed that you are the Holy One of God*" (6:68,69).

In John's Gospel, the "hatred" that the world has for Him (7:7; 15:18,23–25) is expressed in a number of ways:

- He is rejected by His own family (7:1–10).
- He is threatened with arrest (7:30–52).
- He is threatened with stoning (8:59; 10:31).
- His reputation is besmirched (9:24–29).
- He is slandered (10:19–21).
- He is finally arrested and killed (18:1—19:37).

Jesus also predicts that the hatred that the world has for Him will spill over to His disciples (15:18–21). This had already been foreshadowed in the experience of some who had trusted in Him, such as the healed blind man who refused to denounce Jesus and was consequently "cast out" (9:34) and Nicodemus who was ridiculed for daring to defend His legal rights (7:52). Jesus knew that persecution and suffering—not prosperity, power, or influence—would be the norm for those who received Him and found life in His name. In 16:1 Jesus tells His disciples that they can expect persecution, "*to keep you from falling away.*" If we are correct in the assertion that John's Gospel was written to encourage believers to persevere in their faith, this warning is very much in line. The disciples are not to be shaken or overcome with doubt when persecution comes upon them. Jesus warns them:

"They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father nor me. But I have told these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you." (16:2–4)

Knowing that Jesus had warned them ahead of time is meant to give strength to believers in the hour of persecution. They can be assured that nothing from the

outside can snatch them from the hand of Jesus and the Father (John 10:28,29) and that the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father has been sent by the Son to help them (15:26,27). The believers are to remain in a relationship of love and trust in the face of the unbelief and hatred of the world. Persecution cannot and will not be stopped by persuasion, education, or legislation. The world does these things simply because they do not know God. The world's hatred is not ultimately rooted in hatred of Christians; it is rooted in hatred toward God.

The appropriate response for the believer is to witness through proclamation and example to the hostile world, sacrificially bearing a message of love and reconciliation in the power of the Spirit (15:27). Christianity is not about withdrawing from the world (17:5) but being sent into the hostile world to share the good news of Jesus. Jesus refers to His death as a deliberate "laying down" of His life for His sheep and for those not yet in His fold (10:15,17,18). He does so out of love. As He instructs His disciples to follow His pattern of love (15:9–12), He states, "*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for His friend*" (15:13). Jesus came to lay down His life for us. His life is a pattern for us. We are, therefore, called to lay down our lives for those whom He loves. The call of the disciple is to live a life of sacrificial love, just like Christ—not like Peter who declares that he is ready to "lay down" his life for Christ (13:37) but fails to do so in the face of opposition and potential suffering.

In John 7:4, Jesus' brothers accused Him of wanting fame and mockingly encouraged Him to go to Jerusalem to show Himself openly to the world. At that point, Jesus knew that His "time had not yet come" (7:5). In chapter 12 when His "time" does come for Him to go to Jerusalem, Jesus knows that it will not be through signs and miracles that the world will come to Him, but through His being "lifted up" (12:32). Just prior to that statement, however, immediately following His triumphal entry, John records Jesus saying,

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone: but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there my servant will be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him."
(John 12:23–26)

This statement is John's equivalent to Matthew 10:38; 16:21–28; Mark 8:34–38; Luke 9:23–27; 14:27 and should be taken just as literally to refer to martyrdom. But whereas the synoptic Gospels portray the cost of discipleship as the carrying of a cross, John uses the imagery of a seed that must die in order to bear fruit. Jesus

teaches the disciples in John that “in God’s economy, fruitfulness is achieved only by dying.”²¹¹ If Jesus’ work can be achieved only through His death, so the disciples’ work of bearing fruit will also be achieved only through their deaths.²¹² But if they do give their lives, many others will come into the kingdom and they themselves can expect eternal rewards for their faithfulness. Just as the Son was glorified through His death, the Father will honor the disciples for serving Him faithfully even unto death.

The role of the apostles in John is twofold. First, they are eyewitnesses of Jesus. They bear witness about Him (15:27), personally attesting to the truthfulness of His life, death, and resurrection. Second, the apostles serve as advocates, taking Jesus’ side and pleading His cause in a hostile world (15:18–20; 16:1–4).²¹³ Their task is to convince His opponents that He is the Messiah, the Son of God.²¹⁴ To do this may very well require them to give their lives for the One they bear witness for, but their sacrifice of love will make it possible for others to live. This is the cost of bearing witness. If the hostile, hateful world is to hear the truth of Jesus, His messengers must hate their own lives for the world’s sake.

This is not a task that they can do in their own strength. Jesus had said, “*Apart from me you can do nothing*” (15:5), referring to the fact that fruit bearing is only possible as one abides in Christ in a loving, sacrificial relationship just as that experienced between the Son and the Father.²¹⁵ As Jesus prepares His disciples just prior to His passion, He tells them that He will send them another Helper when He goes to the Father, the Spirit of truth who will be with them forever (14:16,17). Just as they are to be witnesses, so the Holy Spirit will also be a witness to Jesus (15:26,27). The Spirit will remind them of the things that Jesus told them (14:26) and will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (16:8). He will guide the disciples and glorify Christ, taking all that is Christ’s and revealing it to them (16:13–15).

When Jesus first appears to the disciples after His resurrection in John’s Gospel, He greets them and then commissions them: “*As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you*” (20:21). Next He breathes on them and says, “*Receive the Holy Spirit*” (20:22), with a promise that they hold a message of forgiveness and judgment (20:23). The disciples are assured that they do not face the task of witnessing to a hostile world alone. “He will speak and act through them, fulfilling God’s purposes in and through them.”²¹⁶

Scott Grant, in a sermon on John 15:18—16:4 entitled “Understanding Hatred,” made the following useful reminder:

And what truth do we speak? Jesus says that the disciples are qualified to testify about him because they have been with him from the beginning. They are qualified simply on the basis that they have been with Jesus. Therefore, they are

able to speak about Jesus. In that we have been with Jesus, and all believers have been with Jesus, we are qualified to speak about him. We don't have to know everything there is to know about him, or have all the right answers to all the tough questions; we simply need to say what we know, even if we think it's very little. The Spirit testifies alongside us, and only the Spirit can change a heart.

One thing we don't need to testify about is a user-friendly Jesus. Witnesses tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There are two primary elements concerning the truth about Jesus. One is the fatal diagnosis; the other is the miraculous cure. The world is lost. It constitutes sinners who hate God. We do it no favors by soft-pedaling this. For if it doesn't know the diagnosis, it doesn't know it needs a cure. But if the world knows it is guilty of rejecting God, it has an opportunity to embrace the cure: forgiveness in Christ Jesus. If we remove the cross from the gospel, we have no gospel. If we try not to offend the world with the cross, we do it no favors. If we try to lure the world in with good feelings and no talk of the cross, and then sneak the cross in sometime later, we lie and do not practice the truth. Our testimony can and should include how Jesus, our Friend, personally gave us the fatal diagnosis and the miraculous cure, and how he continues to love us enough to confront us with the truth, however painful it may be. Then perhaps the world can see that it has hated Jesus without a cause and embrace him as a Friend.²¹⁷

CHAPTER

Acts of the Apostles: Proclamation and Persecution

PERSECUTION IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Overview of Acts

In Acts 1:3, Luke introduces his account by informing Theophilus that in the time between Jesus' resurrection and ascension, He gave commands to His disciples and "*presented himself alive after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God*" (Acts 1:1–3). In Luke 24:13–35, he recounts how Jesus met up with two of His followers on the road to Emmaus, heading away from Jerusalem perhaps to a place of safety. Jerusalem had become a hostile location for the followers of Jesus. They had witnessed the crucifixion of their Lord, and despite reports that Jesus had risen from the dead, they obviously had their doubts. They decided that it was time to move on before the followers of Jesus were tracked down as well.

As they traveled to Emmaus, Luke records that these two unidentified disciples found themselves engaged in conversation with a fellow traveler about the events that had just taken place in Jerusalem and how Jesus had been killed. The traveler listens as they explain what they had heard and experienced. Finally He interjects, "*O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?*" (Luke 24:25,26).

With that as a basic outline—suffering followed by glory—He walked them through the entire story of Scripture (verse 27). With Christ at the center of it all,

the events in Jerusalem began to make sense. The Servant of God had to suffer in order to be glorified.

When the disciples were finally allowed to realize that it had been Jesus Himself who had been speaking to them,¹ they raced back to Jerusalem to report to the other disciples what they had experienced. There they found them in a barricaded room, obviously in fear of their lives (John 20:19).

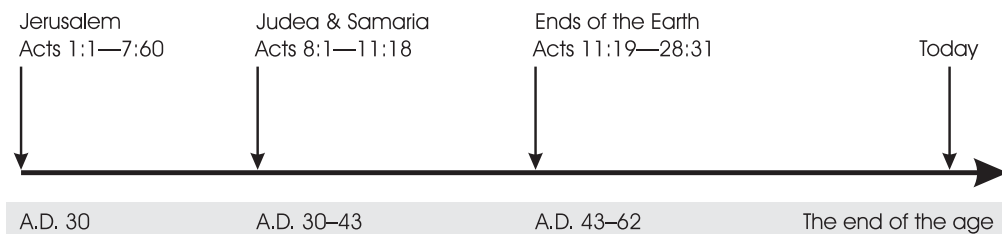
As the two disciples were recounting how Jesus spoke with them, suddenly Jesus appeared in their midst. In verse 45, we read that He opened their minds to understand the Scripture and said to them, *“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem”* (Luke 24:46,47).

Christ’s suffering and rising from the dead was to be told worldwide. It could not be restricted to one group in one room in one city. The global expansion of the gospel would start with them in Jerusalem, but it would not end there.

During the next thirty-nine days, we read in Acts 1 that Jesus went over the theme of the kingdom of God many times with His disciples. He stresses in verse 4 that they are not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. Telling people not to leave town may seem like a strange way to launch a worldwide missionary movement.

Acts 1:8 reads, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

Acts 1:8 provides the outline for the rest of the book of Acts, as we see how the disciples followed Jesus’ command:



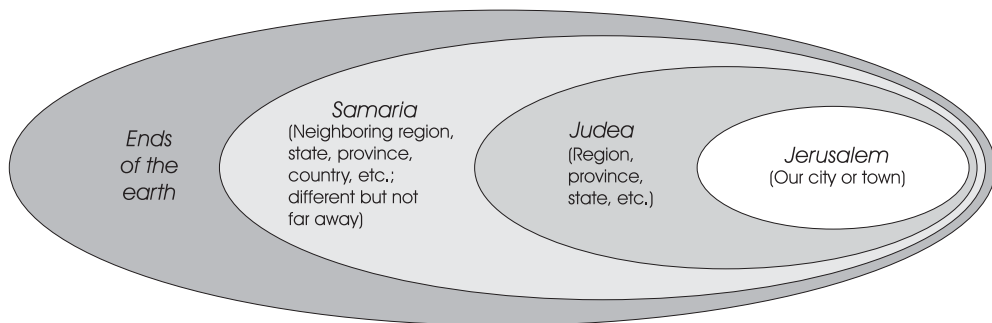
The first seven chapters deal with the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem. Chapters 8:1—11:18 record how the message of Jesus is spread throughout Judea and Samaria. Starting in 11:19, the focus is the spread of the gospel “to the ends of the earth.” When Luke’s account ends in chapter 28, it does so rather suddenly as if to

emphasize that the story is not complete; we, the readers, continue the mission. It is clear that Luke's focus in chapter 28 is not on Paul's fate but on the progress of the gospel. The book does not close with the end of Paul's life or martyrdom but with Paul "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance." These last words stand as an encouragement for all followers of Christ to do the same as the gospel continues to be carried "to the ends of the earth."

The spread of the gospel, however, *begins* in Jerusalem. This leads us to ask, "Why was this necessary? Why did the proclamation of the gospel have to start in Jerusalem?" In answer to this question, we must first address three inadequate explanations that are sometimes proposed.

First, the gospel did not begin in Jerusalem because it was home to the disciples and thus they would find a more ready or receptive audience. Jerusalem was not home for any of the disciples. They were from Galilee, not Jerusalem. The angels in Acts 1:11 addressed them as "men of Galilee." The people of Jerusalem could easily pick out the disciples by their Galilean accents, even in the dark (Matthew 26:73; Luke 22:59). Regional prejudices would not have made Galileans the most suitable messengers for the more urbane citizens of Jerusalem, nor would the disciples have felt at home in the city. Their home was in the smaller towns and rural areas of Galilee.

Acts 1:8 is commonly misapplied to teach a progressive succession of evangelism from home to distant lands. A familiar scenario would be like the one below:



In this view, anyone's hometown is likened to the singular city of Jerusalem and labeled with the phrase "our own Jerusalem" or something similar. Unfortunately, according to Steven Hawthorne, this way of viewing local evangelistic efforts often serves to "detach present-day evangelism efforts from the very historic unfolding that Jesus was trying to emphasize."² Hawthorne explains:

The reality is that there was only one beginning of the gospel. In God's history there will never be another subsequent Pentecost point. Every later initiative is a down-line fruition of that outpouring and obedience. We are now in "the uttermost parts," not repeating the scenario of reaching "our-own-Jerusalem." Acts 1:8 is a geographical reference as much as it is a historical one.³

Second, the spread of the gospel did not begin in Jerusalem because it would be the safest place to start and the disciples would be able to get experience in witnessing before moving on to more difficult or resistant areas. Rather, the opposite was true. The most dangerous place on earth for the disciples to start their ministry was in Jerusalem. Avowed enemies, who had power to throw them into prison, had tried to arrest them in the Garden of Gethsemane only days before (Mark 14:50–52; John 18:8,9). They would likely try again.

Third, Jerusalem was not chosen to be the starting place for the spread of the gospel because the city was familiar territory for the disciples where ministry experience would prepare them for more unfamiliar ministry later on. Looking at the Gospels, one finds that Jesus and His disciples spent relatively little time in Jerusalem. The urban setting of Jerusalem was unfamiliar to the rural Galileans. As noted earlier, there was a regional rivalry between those of Jerusalem and those of Galilee. Neither thought overly fondly of the other. Had Jesus wanted the disciples to start in more familiar territory to gain experience, He undoubtedly would *not* have chosen Jerusalem. Besides, the disciples were hardly novices to ministry. They had spent over three years with Jesus. He had sent them out on at least two mission trips already. They were fully prepared apart from one thing: they lacked the Holy Spirit.

So why did Jesus tell them to stay in Jerusalem? Two reasons are apparent. First, effective witnessing cannot take place apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit has empowered Jesus for His work, so the Spirit was needed to empower the disciples for theirs. Jesus knew that as the gospel was spread, His disciples would face the same opposition He had faced. He had trained them for martyrdom.⁴ He had also promised that just as He had known how to respond and speak when handed over to religious and civic authorities for prosecution, so His disciples would also know what to say when it happened to them. The Holy Spirit would give them the words that they would need at that time (Matthew 10:18–20; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11,12; 21:14,15). Ton adds:

The implications of this promise [i.e. Acts 1:8] are enormous. First of all, it tells the disciples that they will not be alone in the battle; the Holy Spirit will be in them and with them. Secondly, it makes them aware that this battle is actually not their own; it is God's initiative and God's action and concern. They are His

ambassadors, fully endowed with His authority and power. Thirdly, whatever they will achieve will be God's achievement, because God's Spirit has acted through them.⁵

Referring to William Weinrich's research on the relationship between the Holy Spirit and persecution,⁶ Thomas Schirrmacher writes:

Jesus spoke seldom of the Holy Spirit's function, but when He did so, frequently described Him as helper and comforter in persecution (Matt. 10:17–20; Mark 13:9–11; Luke 21:12–19). No wonder that Paul follows the Lord's example in his catalogue of his sufferings by attributing his endurance to the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 6:6). In Philippians 1:19, he writes, "For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." He reminds the Thessalonians, that "ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost" (1 Thess. 1:6,7).⁷

Second, Jerusalem was God's appointed starting place for the spread of the gospel because there were considerable missiological and theological reasons for doing so. While some might argue that the disciples might have drifted back to the comfort zone of their homes in Galilee had they been allowed to leave Jerusalem, I think it more likely that Jesus' instructions reflected a methodology central to the eternal plan of God. Jerusalem was the center of monotheistic worship around the globe. It was the focal point of God's covenant with mankind. Christianity needed to be seen to be in continuity with what had gone on before in God's plan, rather than risk being labeled as a Galilean sect.

In support of this view would be the evidence we have from 1 and 2 Corinthians and Acts 11 where we find Paul taking up a collection from the Gentile churches to present to the church in Jerusalem. A careful reading of Paul on the matter reveals that the motivation of this offering was not primarily with the actual financial need of this particular church, because the famine covered the entire world (see Acts 11:28). This gesture was much more than an act of charity. In Paul's mind, it was an expression of love and Christian unity as the Gentile church ministered to the Jewish saints out of gratitude for what the Jewish believers had done in making it possible for them to know Christ (see Romans 15:27).⁸ There may have also been an even more significant motive for this, however. Christopher Little writes:

The ultimate reason for the collection project rests upon the fact that Paul was constrained by prophecies which spoke of the nations coming to Israel to worship its King (cf. Is. 60:4–14; 66:19–24; Ps. 72:8–11). As a result of seeing believing Gentiles coming to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4 with 21:15–19), Paul hoped that Israel would be provoked to jealousy so that it might repent and accept Jesus

as its Messiah (cf. Rom. 10:1; 11:11–24). Accordingly, Paul’s priestly gift is the Gentiles themselves (Rom. 15:16) to verify that the God of Israel had also become the God of the Gentiles and that there is now only one people of God comprised of all nations (Gal. 3:28,29; Eph. 3:4–6).⁹

Hence, Paul was careful to make sure to emphasize the continuity between Jerusalem and how God had worked in the past, with the present spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth among the Gentiles. The latter was a result of the unfolding plan of God begun with the Jews, fulfilled in Christ, and proclaimed through the Church.

I maintain that this is why the disciples stayed in Jerusalem, just as they had been instructed. When the Holy Spirit came upon them, they immediately began to witness publicly, despite the risk. When persecution came, they did not scatter. They remained in Jerusalem where it was most strategic—and the most dangerous.

They were arrested, shamed, beaten, censured, but they continued. Eventually, one of them, James, was killed (12:2), but even then they remained, refusing to flee. They made no attempt to hide themselves. They knew that for the gospel to spread most effectively, they needed to remain in Jerusalem. It was only after an angel broke Peter out of prison and told him to leave that he finally found a safer place out of town, but there is no indication that the rest of the apostles left or that Peter stayed away any longer than was necessary.

Were the disciples being disobedient to the commission of Christ by staying in Jerusalem? I don’t believe so. They were being the catalyst by which the Church would spread throughout the world. They were busy laying the foundations for a movement that would shake the known world of their day.

They worked in ways that consciously served to advance the spread of the gospel (Acts 6:4). They monitored carefully the expansion of the gospel and when they heard of the gospel advancing, they moved immediately to validate, bless, and support it (Acts 8:14–25; 11:22). When it became clear that the churches had multiplied throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, Peter himself toured the entire region, helping the Church to increase (9:31,32). It was during this time that God used him to share the gospel with the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, demonstrating that God accepts all people into His family, regardless of race. Because the disciples were faithful in remaining in Jerusalem, despite the risks, they were in a position to walk through the door that God had opened to all nations.

Persecution in Acts

To go through the entire book of Acts would be exhaustive, but let us make a few observations of some of the major incidents of persecution:

PASSAGE	NATURE OF PERSECUTION	RESULT
Acts 4	Threats	Prayer (v. 24), filling with the Spirit (v. 31), unity (v. 32), witness (v. 33)
Acts 5	Beatings	Rejoicing (v. 41), witness (v. 42)
Acts 7	Killing of an individual	Saul witnesses Stephen's death
Acts 8	Widespread persecution, arrests	Spreading of the gospel (8:1,4), conversion of Saul (chapter 9)
Acts 9	Plot to kill Paul	Unity (vv. 26,27), witness (v. 28), more persecution (v. 29)
Acts 12	James killed, Peter arrested	Prayer (v. 5), answered prayer
Acts 13	Paul reviled (v. 36), mob incited violence, driven from the city (v. 50)	Gospel goes to the Gentiles
Acts 14:1–7	Plot to harm Paul and Barnabas (v. 5)	Left and preached the gospel (v. 7)
Acts 14:8–22	Paul stoned and left for dead (v. 19)	Believers strengthened and taught to continue in faith, to enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations (v. 22)
Acts 16	Paul imprisoned and beaten (vv. 23,24)	Praised God (v. 25), jailer and family come to Christ (vv. 32–34), their Roman rights were upheld (vv. 35–39)
Acts 17:1–12	Mob riot (v. 5)	Paul sent to Berea (v. 10), many received the message (v. 11)
Acts 17:13–34	Opposition incited by Jews from Thessalonica (v. 13)	Paul sent to Athens (v. 14), some believed (v. 34)
Acts 18	Persecutors become abusive (v. 6)	Paul takes the message to the Gentiles, many believe (vv. 6–8)
Acts 19	Mob action (vv. 23,34)	Paul advised by church to stay away from the crowd; situation settles down, church protected by authorities (v. 37)
Acts 21–23	Paul attacked by Jews and arrested by Romans in the temple	Paul appeals for his legal rights as a Roman; sent to Rome to testify for Christ (23:11); witnesses to political leaders (chap. 24), Festus (25:1–12), Herod Agrippa (25:23–26:32); preaches and teaches in Rome (28:31)

What are some of the common themes that come out of this survey?

1. Persecution provides more opportunities to witness.
2. When the disciples fled, they did not go “underground.” They continued to preach. In Acts, witnessing is always public.
3. Opposition inevitably followed the preaching of the gospel. While persecution does cause the church to scatter in Acts, thereby spreading the gospel, it would be a mistake to conclude the relationship between persecution and church growth is best defined thus. The testimony of Acts is not so much that persecution causes church growth but that church growth and the spread of the gospel tend to cause persecution, as religious and political leaders rise up and try to stop this movement that has “*caused trouble all over the world and has now come here*” (Acts 17:6).¹⁰
4. Persecution came from various sources and in a variety of ways. The explanation for why the believers were persecuted in the book of Acts cannot be traced back to one single reason.

Why Are Christians Persecuted?

Christians throughout history have learned that as the kingdom of God invades the kingdom of this world, there would inevitably be conflicts on a number of levels:

1. **Religious** (John 5:18; 16:2; Acts 8). Christians are perceived as a threat to the predominant religious system, or there is something about Christian belief that the persecutors simply cannot tolerate.
2. **Political** (Matthew 10:17,18; Mark 13:9; Acts 12:1,2; 17:5–7; 18:12ff; Revelation). Christians are perceived as a threat to civil order in their insistence that, ultimately, they serve only one king and cannot offer unconditional patriotism or loyalty to any earthly government or nation. Thus they are viewed as disloyal citizens.
3. **Social** (Matthew 10:36; Mark 13:12,13; John 1:11; 15:18–20; Hebrews; 1 Peter 2:5–8). The acceptance of Christ is seen as a rejection of societal and familial norms.
4. **Economic** (Acts 16:16–24; 19:23–41; James 2:6). The spread of the gospel is perceived as a threat to the success or even continuation of particular businesses.
5. **Emotional** (Acts 5:16–18; 17:5–7). Jealousy on the part of religious leaders, especially, over the growing influence and popularity of Christianity causes acts of violence to be perpetrated against Christians in order to stem the growth or influence of the gospel.

We must also have a clear understanding of what persecution is. There is, unfortunately, no universally accepted legal or theological definition of the word. As working legal definition, The Voice of the Martyrs in Canada has found it helpful to understand persecution to be *a situation where Christians are repetitively, persistently and systematically inflicted with grave or serious suffering or harm and deprived of (or significantly threatened with deprivation of) their basic human rights because of a difference that comes from being a Christian that the persecutor will not tolerate.* When faced with situations where it is difficult to determine whether this is persecution or general suffering, it is helpful to ask, "If a person had other religious beliefs or would change his religion to the majority religion of the country, would things get better for him?" If the answer is yes, then it seems that this would be a situation where persecution is taking place.

A theological definition is no easier to come by. The Hebrew word ¹dr, often translated as "persecute" (Jeremiah 29:18; Psalm 71:11–13), carries with it the idea of "to follow after or pursue."¹¹ *Diwkw* and its derivatives used in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew 5:12; Acts 22:4; 1 Thessalonians 2:15) have virtually the identical meaning of "pursuing or driving away."¹² *ql iyi-*, on the other hand, means to "oppress or afflict" (Matthew 24:9; Acts 3:14; 2 Corinthians 1:5; 4:10).¹³ Both words carry a sense of serious violence, aggression, and hostility or the threat of such. There is an intent to injure and it is carried out in a hostile, antagonistic spirit.¹⁴ Bromiley suggests a definition that serves as good as many and better than most: "Persecution is the suffering or pressure, mental, moral, or physical, which authorities, individuals, or crowds inflict on others, especially for opinions or beliefs, with a view to their subjection by recantation, silencing, or, as a last resort, execution."¹⁵

THE THEOLOGICAL TEACHINGS OF PERSECUTION IN ACTS

As with the book of Luke, Cunningham sees many of the same major theological themes in Acts.¹⁶

1. **Persecution is part of the plan of God.** The persecution of the disciples fulfills the predictions of Jesus. Just as Jesus predicted, Stephen is martyred by those who obviously believed that they were doing a service to God (Luke 21:16; John 16:2–4). Paul appears before "*kings and governors for my [Jesus'] name's sake*" (Luke 21:12; Acts 26:30). Paul sees his suffering as something that must take place in the plan of God when he speaks to the elders of the church in Ephesus:

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. (Acts 20:22,23)

Paul's commitment to continue to live within the plan of God is expressed in the next verse: "*But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God*" (Acts 20:24). When he is shipwrecked on his way to Rome, Paul encourages those around him with the words, "*I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told*" (27:25). In Acts 14:22, following a time of persecution, he strengthens "*the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*"

2. **Persecution is the rejection of God's agents.** Often in Acts the most intense persecution comes from the religious leaders of the Jews, by those who are supposed to be God's people. This rejection of God's messengers is the main thrust of Stephen's sermon. In killing Jesus and Stephen, the Jews continue to walk in the footprints of their fathers (7:51). Paul's parting words to the Jews at the end of the book (28:26–28) are virtually identical to Stephen's words—God's people keep resisting His messengers.
3. **The persecuted stand in continuity with God's prophets.** Persecution authenticates that the apostles and others who proclaim the gospel are God's messengers. In killing Stephen, the Sanhedrin confirms the very point of Stephen's sermon, that he is in line with the rest of Israel's prophets.
4. **Persecution is an integral consequence of following Jesus.** Like in his Gospel, Luke commonly links the persecution of the disciples to their identification with Jesus through the use of the expression "my name."¹⁷ The disciples proclaim the "name" of Jesus, baptize "in his name," and do miracles "in his name," and so it is only proper that the expression should be used to indicate the reason for their persecution. They are persecuted because of their association with Jesus. Cunningham observes, "He is the focal point of conflict, and to the degree that they represent him, they will be persecuted because of that identification."¹⁸

The Christians are not persecuted because they are guilty [of any crime]. Paul is repeatedly pronounced innocent by the Roman authorities (23:29; 25:25; 26:31). Nor are the disciples apostates from Judaism. In fact, being a faithful Jew and believing in all that the prophets teach means to believe in the resurrected Jesus (24:14,15; 26:22,23). The reason for Paul's persecution (and through implication that of all the disciples) is because of his proclamation of the risen Lord (23:6; 24:21; 26:6,7; 28:20).¹⁹

5. **Persecution is the occasion of divine triumph.** In an expression of divine irony and sovereignty, we witness in Luke's account that Christ's Church not only grows in spite of persecution, it even spreads because of it. The persecution of the church in Jerusalem results in the disciples being scattered, and as they go out, they share the gospel. Paul's imprisonment and illegal beating in Philippi leads to the jailer and his family coming to faith. Paul's persecution often leads to his going somewhere else to proclaim the good news of Jesus. As when he goes to Rome, it is not as a missionary as he had hoped (Romans 15:23), but as a prisoner. The Word of God is spread through his "providential failure."²⁰

God's victory is also seen in His keeping power of the disciples in the midst of their affliction, and in their ability to rejoice and remain obedient even in the midst of unchanging situations.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS (WHY WERE THE DISCIPLES READY TO SUFFER AND DIE?)

Before we conclude our study of Acts, three final observations answer the question of why the disciples were apparently so ready to suffer and die for Christ and His gospel:²¹

1. **They had a clear understanding of the sovereignty of God** (Acts 4). Ton notes that the disciples "understood that it is not the business of the messengers to decide what will happen to them or when it will happen. They simply go on witnessing with boldness in the power of the Spirit as He leads them, no matter what happens."²²

In the prayer of the disciples in Acts 4:24, they addressed God with a title that is unique to the New Testament: *Despota* (deposta) meaning absolute ruler or "despot."²³ With the use of this term, the disciples confessed their assurance that God was in absolute control over the events of history and that, by their sufferings, they were carrying out His purposes. God was transforming evil into the fulfillment of His plan for salvation for the world (see Acts 4:27,28). Confident in the sovereignty of God, the disciples prayed a) for boldness to continue preaching, and b) for signs and wonders to accompany their preaching so that the name of Jesus would be lifted up.

2. **They viewed suffering for Christ a privilege and an honor.** In Acts 5:41 we read, "*Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.*" In Acts 16:22–25, the disciples praised

God while in prison and shackled, feeling the burn of the whipping given to them. When released, they did not go back to the church to be pitied, but to “encourage them” (16:40).

In 14:22, after being stoned almost to death, Paul returns to the city to encourage the believers, “*strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*”

The disciples accepted that suffering is to be the lot of the righteous (2 Timothy 3:12; Proverbs 29:10), as they fixed their eyes on the final glory of their journey—entrance into the kingdom of heaven. It is this glory that makes it easier to travel toward it on the road of “many tribulations.” Richard Wurmbrand, referring to his fourteen years of torture and imprisonment in communist Romania, wrote:

The Communists, relying on the instinct of self-preservation, thought a man would do anything to avoid extinction. They were mistaken. Christians who believed what they said in church knew that to die was not the end of life but its fulfillment; not extinction, but the promise of eternity.²⁴

3. **They had a clear perception of the glory of martyrdom.** The martyrdom of Stephen is portrayed in Luke’s account as a model for Christians to emulate and strive toward throughout history. Ton illustrates how Luke deliberately draws parallels between the martyrdom of Stephen and the death of Christ:
 - Jesus was “mighty in deed and word in the sight of God and all the people” (Lk. 24: 19). Stephen, “full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8).
 - Jesus was accused of speaking against the Temple. Likewise, Stephen was accused of speaking against the “holy place, and the Law” (Acts 6:13). In Jesus’ case, the witnesses were not able to prove that the accusations were true, but Jesus’ own statement was considered proof enough for condemnation (Lk. 22:67–71). Stephen’s speech provoked the same type of violent reaction (Acts 7:54).
 - Jesus told the High Priest that “from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Lk. 22:69). Stephen saw “the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56).
 - When they were crucifying Jesus, He prayed for them, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34). Stephen also prayed

for the ones who were stoning him: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” (Acts 7:60).

- Before He died, Jesus prayed, “Father, into Thy hands I commit My Spirit” (Lk. 23:46). Similarly, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” (Acts 7:59).²⁵

Ton continues:

As part of their training for suffering and martyrdom, Jesus had taught His disciples that “a pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Lk. 6:40). Obviously, in relating this account, Luke had the express intention of presenting Stephen as a “fully trained” pupil.²⁶

Throughout his martyrdom, Stephen is not depicted as being a passive recipient of persecution. He takes the initiative to the end. He proclaims courageously, testifies to seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God, forgives his persecutors, and entrusts his spirit to God. He is the aggressor, not the victim. It must have made a lasting impact on the witnesses. It certainly did on the man watching over the coats, a religious zealot named Saul.

CHAPTER

4 Teaching of the Apostles

PAUL

As we saw with the book of Acts, Paul suffered persecution almost immediately following his conversion, and so it was with many of his converts. Persecution is not the lot just of dedicated, mature believers; it may also strike the weakest, youngest, oldest, and most vulnerable as well as the pillars of the local church.

Paul's theology of persecution is multi-faceted, emphasizing different aspects of the theme depending on the situation he is addressing. Yet there are identifiable common threads running throughout his letters.

1 & 2 Thessalonians

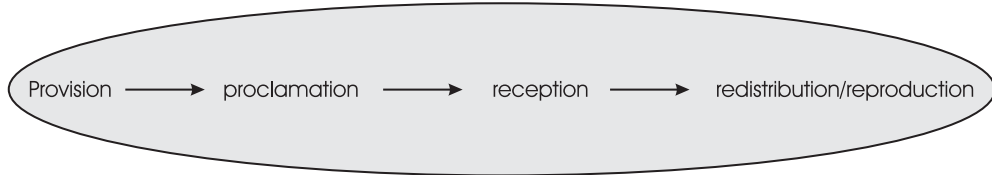
1 Thessalonians

The Thessalonian letters are generally accepted to be the first of Paul's writings. Given the persecution that Paul and several of the first Christians suffered in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9), it is not surprising that when he writes to these believers, he makes mention of it.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:6,7 he writes that the Thessalonians had become "*imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*"

When Paul speaks of the Thessalonians becoming imitators of himself and Christ, it is to their afflictions that he is referring. Just as Jesus had suffered making provision for the gospel on the cross, and Paul suffered for the gospel through proclamation, so the Thessalonians suffered for the gospel by receiving it and pro-

claiming it to others (verse 8). All facets of the evangelistic effort are done within the context of persecution:



In chapter 2, Paul repeats this theme to the Thessalonians by writing that they had become imitators of the churches in Judea because they, like the Jewish churches, had suffered at the hands of their own countrymen (2:14). While the faithful witness of the church there pleased him, it is obvious that Paul was not at all certain that their faithfulness had been inevitable. Paul speaks of having been “torn away” from them (2:17). He had felt keenly his sudden and premature separation from the church in Thessalonica. As he thought of the condition of the church when he left it, he saw that it had been both so promising and so inexperienced. He had been ripped away before he was confident that they could stand. As time had gone by, Paul had heard reports that they were suffering for their faith (2:14) but he had no idea how they were faring in such a hostile environment. He states in 2:18 that he had made repeated attempts to visit them again but each time “Satan stopped” him.

W. M. Ramsey suggests that this satanic activity was evidenced in Acts 17:9 in the city official’s decision to demand that Jason and the other believers post a bond insuring that Paul, the alleged cause of the rioting, would leave the city and never return.¹ Had Paul returned, he would have caused considerable trouble and hardship for Jason and the rest of the church. Attempts to have this ban lifted appear to have been unsuccessful.

This ingenious device put an impassable chasm between Paul and the Thessalonians (the *evēkopsen* is the strong term used). So long as the magistrates maintained this attitude, he could not return: he was helpless, and Satan had power. His only hope lay in an alteration of the magistrates’ policy. They would not be long in power; and perhaps their successors might act differently. But the patriarchs doubtless thought that they treated the case mildly and yet effectually; they got rid of the cause, without inflicting any punishment on any person.²

If this interpretation is correct, this would be in keeping with other places in the New Testament where Satan is referred to as being behind the actions by governing powers against the message from God.³

In such a dilemma, Paul's concern for the Thessalonians continued to gnaw away at his mind unabated. Finally, when he could stand it no longer, Paul decided that since he himself could not go to Thessalonica, he would send Timothy to "*establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions*" (3:2,3). Paul was obviously anxious to learn whether they had heeded his warning and stood steadfast. He had repeatedly warned them when he was with them that they would suffer for their faith. In fact, he had told them that they were "destined" to suffer affliction (3:3) and this is exactly what had happened (3:4).

Election and Predestination

Many Christians avoid discussing the biblical doctrines of election and predestination because of their historically controversial nature. I can understand this desire to avoid controversy that has too often ended with harsh words, misrepresentations, and, in some sad cases, ridicule. But this should not keep us from looking at doctrines that are very much scriptural and from seeking to understand them. Like all doctrines, these two have significant applications for the life of the believer, particularly in reference to the resistance to the gospel that the messenger of God faces.

I recognize that not all will agree with the position that I will set forth in the following pages. It is beyond the scope of this research to fully discuss these doctrines. Entire books have been written on the subject. Karl Barth, for example, wrote 507 pages of small script on the subject of election alone.⁴ I trust, however, that it will become clear why I dare to address these matters in the context of this study.

It is my understanding that "election" and "predestination" may be defined by the following definitions:

- *Election* is the *choosing* act of God in which He determines *who* He will entrust with certain responsibilities and privileges. The focus of election is on the *people* God has chosen to be the instruments of His purposes. Election, however, is not merely a title or a position. The elect are chosen for a specific purpose. Election is for privilege and responsibility.
- *Predestination*, on the other hand, is the *planning* act of God in which He determines *what* privileges and responsibilities the children of God will enjoy and do in order to accomplish His purposes and *how* they will do it; what He will do for them and what they will do and become. The focus of predestination is on God's *plan* and *purpose*. The emphasis is not *who* the objects of predestination are but *what* the elect are predestined to.

God, from before the creation of the world, foresaw that certain individuals would accept Christ (Romans 8:29). He decided (predestined) that those who did so

would enjoy certain privileges and responsibilities; they would be conformed into the image of His Son (Romans 8:29) and would be given the privilege and responsibility of joining His Son in fulfilling His purposes (Ephesians 1:3,10).⁵ They were *chosen* to be holy and blameless (Ephesians 1:4) and *predestined* to become members of His family (Ephesians 1:5) and to receive an inheritance (Ephesians 1:11).

It is my position that election and predestination are not to individual salvation but refer to those who are *in Christ*.⁶ Believers are only elect because they are in Him. G. MacDonald writes, “No one is chosen on his own, that is, outside of Christ, or apart from incorporation into the church.”⁷ Election primarily has to do with believers as a class or group rather than as individuals.⁸ We are not elected as isolated individuals, but as members of Christ’s Body, chosen to fulfill His purposes in the world. Indeed, we can refuse to perform the tasks for which we were chosen.⁹ Peter also urges his readers to “be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10). They are to exhibit holy character consistent with their position in Christ (1:5–9).

From a historical perspective, the Church’s election actually predates Israel’s, having been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Israel was chosen in Abraham temporally, to fulfill the purposes of God. MacDonald explains: “But this does not pit the Church against Israel, for all Abraham’s true children have his faith, inherit the promise made to him, and therefore now belong to Christ (Gal. 3:29). And by the same token, ‘those who believe [whoever they are, viz., the Gentiles—Gal. 3:8] are children of Abraham’ (Gal. 3:7).”¹⁰

God preplanned, from before the creation of the world, to have a Church of those who were “like Christ,” and this plan, though once hidden, is no longer a secret mystery but fully revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:9; 3:7–12).¹¹ The calling of Israel to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6; Acts 13:47) was still waiting to be implemented at the time of Christ’s crucifixion. Before creation, God predestined Himself to be mankind’s Savior and determined to choose all who accept His work in their behalf to join Him in His plan to bring the blessings of this act to all people everywhere. His purpose for the nations (Genesis 12:3) has never changed. Through Israel, the plan of God, determined before the creation of the world, found its expression in time and space, unfolded and reached its fulfillment in Christ. After His ascension, this gospel was taken to all nations, according to God’s plan, and it became clear who God’s chosen people were—all those who trust in Christ.¹² This is good news and reveals the mystery that God desires all nations to be His chosen people. This is the message that the elect are commissioned to share with all people everywhere. Jesus said that He chose His disciples so that

they would be fruit-bearing messengers (John 15:16), a witness through which others might be saved.¹³

As they bring this blessing to the nations, made possible because of the death of Jesus Christ, His chosen people follow in His footsteps and suffer together with Him. There is never a separation between Christ and His people anywhere in the Scripture. Thus Paul can say that, like Christ, we are destined to suffer for the sake of the gospel (1 Thessalonians 3:3,4). This is part of the predetermined plan of God. God's destiny for man could only be accomplished in Christ. He knew that the price for man's salvation would be the death of His Son and He also knew the price of taking this blessing to the nations would be the death of His adopted sons and daughters. But in His wisdom, God knew that this was the only way that the world could be saved and all nations reconciled to Him.

Paul had warned the Thessalonians of this truth from the very start of their discipleship. And they now knew by experience the truth of what Paul had warned them about. This was something that Paul did not need to remind them of now. They knew that believers in Christ were destined or appointed (*keimpeqa*) to suffer for and with Him. If God had appointed (*epeito*) His people to obtain salvation on the Day of Judgment (1 Thessalonians 5:9, cf. 1:10), He has equally appointed them to endure affliction in their present mortal life.¹⁴

In 1 Thessalonians 3:7,8, Paul had said that the faith and perseverance demonstrated by the Thessalonians in the midst of *their* persecution actually encouraged him in the midst of *his* distress and persecutions. The fact that they had stood firm may have confirmed to Paul and his companions their confidence that God had indeed led them to Macedonia (Acts 16:10). In 1 Corinthians 2:3 we learn that Paul had originally come to Corinth beset with "*weakness and much fear and trembling.*" Perhaps the hostility he and his companions had experienced in the cities of Macedonia had discouraged them. Now that they had received Timothy's report that the gospel had indeed taken root in Macedonia, they could go forth with a renewed sense of confidence in the power of God working through and in them. They would have known that the God who had strengthened the Thessalonians was also the God who was with them.

2 Thessalonians

A few months following his first letter, Paul writes to the Thessalonians again. He shares how he has been telling others of their faith and endurance, likely as a means to encourage these believers as well by their testimony (just as he had been encouraged earlier). In 2 Thessalonians 1:4, Paul writes how he boasts of the Thessalonians

to *“the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.”*

“This is evidence,” Paul says in verse 5, *“of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.”* Suffering persecution, Paul says, is evidence of the genuineness of their faith. Their steadfastness under it marks them as being worthy of the coming kingdom of God. It shows that God can trust them with greater responsibilities in the future. In verses 11 and 12 Paul says that he always prays *“that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Paul prays that God would, by His grace and power, inwardly transform the Thessalonians through their afflictions and help them to practically apply their faith to the glory of God so that they would be worthy of His calling, prepared to fulfill the purposes for which they were called.

Rewards in Heaven

The second coming of Christ is one of the main concerns of both 1 and 2 Thessalonians. Paul’s great concern for the Thessalonians is the state in which they will be found at the coming of the Lord. He wants to be confident that they will be found worthy and Paul knows that one of the consequences of persecution is that it provides opportunity to do just that.

As we pass faithfully through suffering, temptations, and trials, we demonstrate that God will be able to entrust us with much higher positions or responsibilities in heaven. It demonstrates the kind of people we are. We are found worthy.

It seems to me that the biblical text is clear that not all believers will possess equal glory in heaven. The teaching of Jesus and the apostles is that one’s responsibilities and privileges will be largely determined by the perseverance and faith demonstrated when facing persecution, temptations, and pressures calculated to drive one away from God.

Josef Ton suggests two scenarios:

To formulate the problem in another way, let us suppose that there are two decent, young Christian men in America. One of them is concerned with the situation of the primitive people in the jungle of the Amazon and decides to go to them as a missionary. He finds his tribe, lives with them in primitive conditions, learns their language, translates the Bible into their language, introduces them to Christ, and lifts them up to a new life. The other man does not care about others. He accumulates riches for himself and lives a life of comfort and ease.

Yes, he goes to church and tithes his money, yet he limits himself to the minimum of what is commonly meant as being a Christian. The question then is this: When these individuals get to heaven, will there be a difference in their eternal condition?

We can also consider another case: suppose that there are two Christian women in a country in which Christianity is viciously persecuted. One of them keeps a low profile, so that few people, if any, know that she is a Christian. The other one is a shining light and many are converted through her testimony. As a result, she is persecuted, then arrested, tortured, and killed. My question is the following: When the two ladies arrive in heaven, will there be a difference in their eternal state?¹⁵

Ton argues that there will be. Both will be saved, but one will receive greater position and responsibilities. Foundational to this assertion is the biblical teaching that believers really will reap the consequences of the deeds they have performed on earth as followers of Christ. Those who have been unfaithful in little will be given little in the future. Those who have proven faithful in little will be given even more. It is not a matter of works; it is because we have responded to God's grace and allowed Him to work in our lives.

But it is not only believers who can look ahead to the Lord's return for their inheritance. Paul reminds the Thessalonians that those who have been responsible for their sufferings will also receive their reward. Second Thessalonians 1:6–10 reads:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. (NIV)

The promised relief for those undergoing affliction is not necessarily to be received here and now but is assured in the future. We cannot count on relief from persecution in this life, but we can be assured that our sufferings are not meaningless nor will the injustice of suffering for doing right be thwarted forever. The scales of justice will be balanced eventually. Life will not make sense this side of eternity, but it will someday. We must live in the light of eternity.

In the meantime, our calling as Christians is not to be so concerned about *if* or *why* we will suffer but *how* we will suffer. Will we allow suffering to be an instru-

ment in God's hand to equip us for eternity, or will we demand the rewards of eternity now and end up with nothing?

Pray for Us

Paul concludes 2 Thessalonians with a request that they pray for him (3:1–5):

Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

"I'm drawing my letter to a close," he says to his friends in Macedonia. "But there is something I want to stress before I do. I've been giving you instructions that will help you in your work for the Lord, but now I need some help from you. Pray for us."

Paul knows that this is not a mere platitude, a request that he is expected to make because it sounds spiritual. He knows that prayer is much more than that.

It is an acknowledgement that no matter what we do, if God is not in it, our labor is no longer a response to His grace but a manifestation of our attempt to do His work by our own strength.

God's work must be done God's way under God's power to God's glory. If our acts of obedience through giving, going, writing, and however else we serve the Lord and His Persecuted Church, are not initiated and upheld through prayer, then it seems to me that we are guilty of presumption. We assume that it is we who must "do something" rather than acknowledging that, from start to end, it is His work and that we are merely the manifestations of His life in the world.

"*Pray for us,*" Paul asks. And then he mentions two things that he would like his friends to pray for. First, "*Pray that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored.*" What Paul probably had in mind when he wrote this were the words of Psalm 147:15: "*[The Lord] sends out His command to the earth; His word runs swiftly.*"

While Paul often referred to his missionary activities as "running," here it is the message that runs rather than the messenger. God, of course, uses men and women to accomplish His work and to spread His Word, but Paul acknowledges here that God is the ultimate cause. It is *His Word, His message* that is critical, not the messenger. It is His Word that melts hearts, opens ears, and transforms lives. And so Paul asks that the message be permitted to run swiftly, rather than the messenger.

The second thing that Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray for is in verse 2: "*that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men.*" Paul knows that persecution and the spread of God's Word are intrinsically linked. He knows that where the Word of

God runs, men rise up to oppose the message and the messenger. “*For not all have faith*” (3:2).

Still, the apostle is confident that God is faithful (3:3) and that He would “*establish and guard you against the evil one.*” In 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and 3:5 and 2 Thessalonians 2:9, Paul alludes to the activity of Satan against God’s messengers.¹⁶ To say that this verse is a promise, assuring the Thessalonians that they would not suffer persecution, would be contrary to the rest of the letter. It may be concluded from this that God’s protection from the power of Satan may not include protection from persecution. The thrust of verse 3 would seem to point toward an understanding of God’s establishing and protecting believers as they are tempted to fall into sin or disobedience (perhaps in the face of opposition). The promise is that God will protect them, as God directs their hearts to His love and the steadfastness of Jesus (3:5).

1 and 2 Corinthians

First-century Corinth was a fascinating place. A metropolitan seaport, Corinth was intellectually alert, materially prosperous, culturally varied, and religiously diverse.¹⁷ Individualism was greatly valued and fiercely defended. It was a relatively new city, having been founded as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. after the old city of Corinth had been totally destroyed in an earthquake a century earlier.¹⁸ As described by Stendahl, first-century Corinth was a great and confused city that, while it had many problems, was never dull.¹⁹ That was certainly true of the Church there as well.

In my opinion, 1 and 2 Corinthians are the keystone to understanding Paul’s theology of persecution. Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians was a difficult one. His letters to them are very personal. Paul stayed in Corinth for approximately eighteen months (a remarkably long time for him to be in any one place). His time there was one of relative peace and calm. When the Jews in Corinth rejected the gospel and Paul refocused his ministry to the Gentiles, they did not raise up a riot as their counterparts had done in other cities. The only case of persecution in Acts 18:12–18 is so mild in comparison to others that Paul did not even feel compelled to leave for the safety of others. We read that “*he stayed for many days afterwards*” (Acts 18:19). While 2 Corinthians 1:6 does refer to the Corinthians patiently enduring suffering, it seems apparent to me that the persecution facing believers in Corinth was considerably less than in other places. Perhaps this may be in part due to the multicultural nature of the city which would have worked against organizing religiously intolerant mobs. Fee also notes that although there were some Jews in the Corinthian community, there is little in Paul’s letters to the church there that suggests a Jewish background.²⁰ Since most of the converts seem to have been

Gentiles, the Jewish religious leaders (whose counterparts had instigated much of the opposition to Paul in other cities) may have felt that Paul was little threat to them. Or perhaps the number of Jews in Corinth was insufficient to mount an effective resistance. Whatever the reason, the church was established there with little opposition.

Perhaps this relative lack of resistance to the gospel and its messengers is why the Corinthian Christians had such a difficulty understanding the role of suffering and persecution in the life of the follower of Jesus. Unlike the Thessalonians, they had not had to suffer because of the gospel, and as most people do, they began to assume that what they experienced was fairly normal for all Christians everywhere.

After Paul left Corinth, other preachers and teachers who had little regard for Paul either arrived in the city or rose up from their own midst. Among other things, they maintained that Paul's suffering was proof that he was not a true apostle or messenger of God.²¹ To them, God's work was done in strength and power, not in weakness and suffering.

To the Corinthians, Paul must interpret his sufferings in such a way that they understand that God's methodology of the cross is to be our methodology as well. This is how God wins His greatest victories—in weakness, not in demonstrations of power and strength.

1 Corinthians

The first two chapters of 1 Corinthians set the stage for much of the tension between Paul and the Corinthians as Paul contrasts God's methods and the world's. The Corinthians have failed to understand that there is an irreconcilable difference between the two.

Paul introduces his ministry in 1:17 with the words, "*For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*" From the long elaboration that follows in 1:18—2:16, it seems likely that "*words of eloquent wisdom*" were important to the Corinthians, both in terms of content and form.²² In the subsequent verses, Paul will contrast the "human wisdom" of the world with the divine wisdom of the cross. From his words in 2:1–5, Paul obviously is concerned that the human wisdom with which the Corinthians seem most enamored is characterized by the Greek philosophical, rhetorical tradition. Such a tradition emphasized form over content, and confidence in one's skill to persuade over a reliance on the Spirit to change the hearts of the listener.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul claims to have come to them not with eloquence or superior wisdom, but as one who resolves to know nothing except "*Jesus Christ and*

him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom but on God's power" (2:2–5). Hence the passage comes full circle returning to Paul's words in 1:18 that the wisdom and power of the cross seem to be foolishness and weakness to men (and especially to the Corinthians). Just as Jesus had revealed God's plan through the weakness and foolishness of the cross, so Paul, as a minister of Christ, ministers in message and methodology in weakness and foolishness.

Paul refuses to adopt the methodology that the world of his day sees as effective and attractive. In contrast to Greek wisdom, which looked for eloquence and style over substance, with a power to convince that was emotionally charged but only temporary, Paul comes with the power of substantial argument that can “demolish strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4) and operates with a power that suffers and dies rather than victoriously triumphs. Rather than being concerned about using words and methods calculated to impress and convince, Paul relies on the power of the Spirit to change the hearts of his listeners, as he proclaims the wisdom of God. This is not to say that Paul's arguments are not well thought out, simplistic, or anti-intellectual. Quite the contrary! A reading of any of Paul's letters reveals a man with a keen intellect with well-reasoned arguments. Paul is not contrasting here an intellectual with an unintellectual or “simple” presentation of the truth.²³

What Paul is saying is that preaching of any sort will fail if there is not a demonstration of the Spirit working in the messenger's life that is characterized by weakness, with a corresponding reliance on the Spirit to move in the hearts of the listener through the truth of the message.²⁴ The danger is that of self-dependency, of trusting in one's skill as a communicator, rather than in the truth of the message empowered by the Holy Spirit. In the eyes of unredeemed humanity, this is foolish and weak, but through this divinely orchestrated methodology, the world is conquered.

This contrast between the wisdom of man and the wisdom of God (1:17) is seen in 1 Corinthians 1:18—2:16 in two ways: the message of the gospel, and the messengers of the gospel. In 1:18–25, Paul confronts the Corinthians with the message of the gospel, saying that the message of the cross contrasts with the wisdom of this world. If one wanted to proclaim a message that would be “user friendly,” one would hardly think of preaching a message of a crucified Savior. Quoting from Isaiah 29:14, Paul argues that what God had foretold through the prophets has now been accomplished through the crucifixion of Jesus. The gospel is not a new form of wisdom or philosophy thought up by God or men. It was part of a divine plan that no man would have ever considered—to bring about reconciliation through a crucified Savior. To both Jew and Gentile, this would have been unthinkable, too

humiliating for God. Perhaps it was this sense of humiliation that surrounded the message of the gospel and God's methodology of the cross that motivated the Corinthian believers to "move on" to "higher" spiritual truths, beyond just the message of the cross.²⁵

Michael Horton makes the following observation:

The Corinthian believers did not want to win their sophisticated neighbors as much as they wanted to be like them. In a culture which idealized wealth, strength, wisdom, and nobility, Christianity made little sense. In the face of all of this, Paul expects the Corinthians to tell the neighbor next door that their Savior-God was sentenced to death by (a) his own people, (b) the Roman authorities, and (c) God the Father himself. Thus, salvation in this scheme is the result of a shameful death on a cross which, for Romans, had the equivalent criminal associations we would make with the electric chair. No wonder many cultures have found it difficult to understand this core message of Christianity! Nevertheless, at the point Christianity is least saleable, it is the most powerful.²⁶

This method of the cross, which for the Jews is a stumbling block and for the Gentiles simply foolishness, proved to be "God's wisdom" and "God's power" (1:21–25). This way of humiliation and weakness, of suffering and self-sacrifice, Paul tells the Corinthians, is God's way of action; it is God's way of being involved with mankind and His way of solving mankind's problems. To "move beyond" the cross is, to Paul's mind, not advancement or maturity, but abandonment of Christ altogether. The cross is central to the message and methodology of the gospel. As such, it stands against both self-reliance and any sort of arrogant "super-spirituality."²⁷

It is not only the content or message of the gospel that stands in direct contradiction to the wisdom of the world, Paul continues in 1:26–31, but also the messengers of the gospel. "Look at the kind of people that God has called to be His messengers through whom He will accomplish His purposes," Paul says.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. (1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

If Paul had taken an approach to being a messenger of God that the world would have considered "wise," it seems obvious that he should have preached to

those who might have been able to be more influential, outstanding members of society. These might have been able to appeal to others of their own societal status and lower, because of their charisma or respectability. Instead, God chooses to use those who have little to commend themselves to become His messengers, so that all of the glory might be His.

The method of the cross is not only God's way; it must be the way of all of God's people and especially God's messengers and agents. Speaking of his own ministry in 2:1–5, Paul reminds the Corinthians:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul preaches a gospel of weakness rather than a gospel of glory.²⁸ He wants nothing but Christ crucified. He preaches a gospel that is dependent upon the Spirit to use, because the crux of the message is not one that people will accept apart from a work of the Spirit. In this way, the power of God is seen. Paul's reliance is not on his considerable skill as an intellect. His confidence is in God's ability to use him, a weak vessel, to communicate a divinely revealed message that to the world appears foolish but is the revelation of a restoration plan that God designed from before time began (2:6–16).

God's method of the cross not only provides the content of the gospel but also the methodology. The method of the cross is to be followed by those who are recipients of its benefits because God's people are not separate from Him. It is God who operates in and through them. In this manner, they form a partnership. As the apostle states in 1:9, "you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9). In 1 Corinthians 3:9 he adds, "For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building." We enter into the fellowship of His sufferings, as he mentions in Philippians 3:10.

In 1 Corinthians 4:9–13 Paul writes:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.

We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when

slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

As Paul looks at the lives of those who are truly serving God, he is reminded of the Roman parades that follow a great military victory. The conquering army would march through the city, dragging the vanquished at the back of the procession to show off how powerless they were. Paul says that this is how God's messengers appear to the world. They appear weak and powerless, the least among the prisoners of war, condemned to a public death. They are not a spectacle of power, affluence, efficiency, and comfort, but of weakness and death, just as their Lord had been. As Paul reminded the Corinthians in 1:27, God chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

When the world looks at God's messengers, what should they see? According to Paul, they should not see their strength but their weakness; not their healthy bodies, fine wardrobes, and comfortable homes, but their poverty, rags, and homelessness; not the flattering accolades of the powerful, but curses, slander, and persecution at the hands of everyone. In short, the messengers of God are the "scum of the earth, the refuse of the world." They are just like their Lord and Savior.²⁹

Jonathan Bonk, in his book *Missions and Money*, writes that any mission strategy that is worthy to be called Christian must be characterized by three things: the Incarnation (rather than self-serving), the cross (rather than self-preservation), and weakness, dependency upon God (rather than stability and strength).³⁰ We are to be lambs among wolves, not wolves among lambs or "super lambs."³¹

I would argue that these traits—the Incarnation, the cross, and weakness—should be characteristic of all messengers of God, regardless of who they are or where they serve. This is not simply restricted to cross-cultural mission strategies, as Paul makes evident in 2 Corinthians when he shifts his emphasis from God's methods to ours.

Baptism for the Dead

One of the most cryptic passages in Scripture is Paul's reference to those who are "*being baptized on behalf of the dead*" (1 Corinthians 15:29) as he defends the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. Opposing those who denied that there would be a resurrection, Paul brings forward two arguments: 1) if there is no resurrection, why are some people being *baptized on behalf of the dead*? and 2) if there is no resurrection, why does he face danger hourly (v. 30), die daily (v. 31), even to the point of fighting beasts in Ephesus (v. 31)?³²

The second argument is easier to understand. Paul is saying that if there is no resurrection, then why is he suffering persecution? If this life is all that there is, it hardly seems worthwhile to put one's life on the line for a cross-centered gospel.

Rather than living a life of self-sacrifice, one would be better off living strictly for the moment: “*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*” (15:32).

John Piper, in his book *Desiring God*, tells of reading a devotional by Richard Wurmbrand regarding a Cistercian abbot who was interviewed on Italian television. The interviewer apparently was intrigued by the Cistercian tradition of living in solitude and silence. He asked the abbot, “And what if you were to realize at the end of your life that atheism is true, that there is no God? Tell me, what if it were true?”

The abbot replied, “Holiness, silence, and sacrifice are beautiful in themselves, even without promise of reward. I still will have used my life well.”

Piper writes:

The first impact of the abbot’s response was a superficial, romantic surge of glory. But then something stuck. It did not sit well. Something was wrong. At first I could not figure it out. Then I turned to the great Christian sufferer, the apostle Paul, and was stunned by the gulf between him and the abbot.

Paul’s answer to the interviewer’s question was utterly contrary to the abbot’s answer. The interviewer had asked, “What if your way of life turns out to be based on falsehood, and there is no God?” The abbot’s answer in essence was, “It was a good and noble life anyway.” Paul gave his answer in 1 Corinthians 15:19, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied.” This is the exact opposite of the abbot’s answer.³³

To say that a life of sacrifice for others would still be worth living even if there is no resurrection sounds spiritual, but it is wrong. It would be a waste. If a sacrificial life is to be worth living, Ton says, “there must be a life beyond this one, a life in which we will harvest the rewards for our constant dying on earth.”³⁴ This is the whole purpose of Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians 15 in which he concludes: “*Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain*” (15:58).

Paul’s first argument, however, is much more difficult to understand. But the context provides a clue to its interpretation. Ton points out that Paul employs the term “baptism” in a number of ways in 1 Corinthians.³⁵ As such, only the context can provide us clues of his intended meaning in 15:29.

I would suggest that 15:29 is the beginning of an argument that he further develops in verses 30–32. What we have here is Paul using “baptism” in the sense that Jesus does in Luke 12:50 and Mark 10:38,39, to denote the bloody death of martyrdom. The words “for the dead,” would thus signify being baptized, not as the believer is with the baptism of water to join the body of Christ, but rather to join the ranks of the martyrs—the dead.³⁶

If this interpretation is correct, Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 15:29 would therefore read, "If there is no resurrection, what will be gained by such baptized ones who are slain for their love of Christ?" With this understanding, the following verse, "*Why am I in danger every hour?*" naturally and logically transitions the readers to the risks that Paul is taking for Christ, all of which are for nothing if the dead are not raised. Verse 29 would therefore teach that if there is no resurrection, the martyrs have died for nothing. There was no reason for them to accept the baptism of martyrdom.

2 Corinthians

There are six main passages that deal with persecution in 2 Corinthians.

1. *Paul's sufferings are linked with Christ's (1:3–11).*

In 1 Corinthians, Paul's emphasis is on the cross of Christ. In 2 Corinthians, his emphasis shifts to the cross of the Christian. This is critical to his defense of his ministry.

It would be easy for us to see Paul as a hard-hitting, efficient, driven man, able to leap tall buildings with a single bound—a super-Christian that not one of us could ever hope to emulate. We could readily view him as a triumphalist, a man whose abundant success is ever crowned with new glories and possibilities given by God.

But this is not the Paul of the New Testament. Triumphalism, moreover, is the mark of his opponents, not of Paul himself. It is not his victories that he points to when he wants to show that he is a follower of Jesus Christ. It is not his achievements, the numbers of churches that he has planted, or the number of baptisms of converts he has brought to God that Paul refers to when he needs to prove that he is God's messenger.

As mentioned earlier, after Paul left Corinth, other teachers had either arrived in the city from the outside or had risen from within the churches themselves. Paul calls them "super-apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:5; 12:11). They ridicule Paul's methodology and theology. They boast of their visions, their superior knowledge, their prosperity, of how people flock to hear them and how no one persecutes them for what they preach. They come bearing letters of recommendation from others telling how wonderful they are (3:1).

It is apparent from Paul's correspondence that the Corinthians have fallen under their influence. They have come to believe that these "super-apostles" typify what a true messenger of God must be like. As they compare Paul's work and testimony to these men, they conclude that Paul must be a second-rate messenger, obviously missing out on the blessings of God.

Paul counters with an argument that few would even consider. He starts with the cross, as a justification for his ministry and methodology. He backs it up by referring to the example of our Lord in 2 Corinthians 1:5: “*For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings...*” In 4:10 he says that we are “*always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.*”

In Colossians 1:24, Paul will develop this thought further, but the thought here is that we partner with Christ in His sufferings. Just as the Lord stopped Saul on the Damascus Road with the words, “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4), so the Lord continues to identify with the sufferings of His people, as they suffer for their identification with Him. We are linked with our Head and He with the members of His body and we are linked one to another, as 1 Corinthians 12:26 says: “*If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together*” (1 Corinthians 12:26). He participates with us in our sufferings as we participate with Him in fulfilling His purposes in history. As He had promised, He never leaves us or forsakes us as we are His witnesses/martyrs.

Christ continues to suffer with us. Thus the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance (2 Corinthians 1:5). This is not the same suffering that took place on the cross two thousand years ago. That was a once-for-all act—complete, never to be repeated, nothing to be added to it. But He continues to suffer afflictions as His people carry out their task of sharing with the world what Christ did for them on that cross. And others share in our suffering (and Christ’s) through their prayers (1:11).

The thing to note is that Paul links his sufferings (and the sufferings of others who are persecuted) with the sufferings of Jesus. The super-apostles are preaching a gospel without a cross, without self-sacrifice, without suffering, and Paul asserts that this is not the gospel that we preach. The gospel of the “super-apostles” is another gospel with another Jesus (2 Corinthians 11:1–4).

In late August 2003, the *New York Times* reported on a theft at the Church of the Holy Cross in midtown Manhattan when caretakers noticed on Sunday morning that a 200-pound plaster rendering of Christ had been removed from a wooden cross near the church’s entrance. The fact that a statue was stolen was less surprising than how it was stolen. The statue was about four feet long, with a steel core, and had been bolted to the cross in four places. The thieves had entered the church, unbolted the figure of Jesus and carried it off, leaving the cross behind. One of the caretakers told the *Times*, “They just decided, ‘We’re going to leave the cross and take Jesus.’ We don’t know why they took just him. We figure if you want the whole crucifix, you take the whole crucifix.” In essence, the thieves wanted Jesus but not the cross.

What about us? Do we want Jesus without a cross? Do we want discipleship without sacrifice? Do we expect our walk with God to be one of uninterrupted peace and tranquility? Do we expect that our service to God obligates Him to remove all suffering and obstacles from our path? If this is our expectation, we have more in common with the Corinthians than we do with Paul.

2. *Paul's sufferings are perceived differently by the world and the people of God (2:14–17).*

In 2:14–17, Paul returns to the imagery of the Roman triumphal procession that he introduced in 1 Corinthians 4. But here it is used slightly differently. He says, “*But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere*” (2 Corinthians 2:14).

The picture Paul conjures up here is of a victorious general (Christ), leading His captives (us) as a public spectacle before the multitude of onlookers. We who were formally God’s enemies have been overcome and taken captive by Him and are led and displayed before the world every day. Paul is in this procession.

As the crowd looks upon those who are God’s witnesses in the world, their relationship with the General determines how they view those in the procession. To those who have also been defeated by Christ and are His slaves, God’s messengers “*are the aroma of Christ to God*” (2 Corinthians 2:15), a beautiful and sweet perfume (2:16b). To those who are perishing (the world), God’s messengers are the stench of death (2:16a).

The Church, whenever it is truly functioning as the servant of God, will be rejected by the world, despised and rejected as if it smells like a dead corpse. Christianity can never be truly “seeker-friendly” (to use contemporary terminology) if it is being faithful to its calling to be a witness in a hostile world.

Why, then, are people who witness the love of God’s people, the forgiveness that they demonstrate toward their enemies, and the courage and faith they exhibit in the face of trial and tribulation, drawn to faith in Christ? It is, of course, only because of the grace of God, drawing men and women to Himself, through His Holy Spirit, opening the eyes of the unbeliever to the truth of the gospel as His people demonstrate Christlike character. It is not because of any glory in the believers themselves. It is only because of what God has wrought in their lives as they live out the reality of Christ living in and through them. The most powerful apologetic is the faithful lives of God’s people, demonstrating love, faith, and hope in the midst of a hostile world.

3. *Paul's sufferings are necessary to manifest the life of Christ (4:5–15).*

In 4:5–7 Paul writes, “*For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*”

Paul continues to use imagery that the super-apostles would never use to describe themselves. He is careful to point out that it is the gospel that is glorious, not the messengers. We proclaim Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as servants. Jesus is Lord, we are not. There is nothing glorious about the messenger. At best we are servants and any light that we have comes from the One who said, “*Let light shine out of darkness.*”

Paul asserts that this is consistent with how God always works. When Jesus came to earth as man and suffered and died, Isaiah says that He had no beauty that would attract us:

*For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him. (Isaiah 53:2)*

In the same way, His messengers possess no great beauty of their own. The treasure that we have is in the message that we bring. Apart from that we are common jars of clay. His power finds its expression in our weakness so that all of the praise and glory may go to Him.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4:8–10)

Many commentators tend to water down verses 8,9, suggesting Paul believes that even though he might be battered, nevertheless God would always keep him safe.³⁷ But this is far from Paul’s thrust.³⁸

Paul says that his persecution (described in verses 8,9) is a demonstration of the fact that he carries with him the “dying of Jesus.” The word for “death” in verse 10 refers to the actual *process* of death rather than the *state* of deadness.³⁹ As Paul thought of Jesus’ life—His rejection, suffering, temptation in the wilderness, affliction in all ways as we are—he realized that Jesus’ dying went on all through His life. The cross was the destination to which all of His other suffering pointed.

“As I go through my life,” Paul says, “I see how Christ continues to live out His life through me. I am constantly in the process of dying; ‘I die daily with Him’ (1 Corinthians 15:31). Like my Master, I never escape affliction, perplexity, and persecution—the suffering, the pains and rigors of a dying man.”

As long as Paul is living, he is in the process of dying for Christ’s sake, so that the life of Christ, achieved through the cross and the resurrection, may be seen in his life. The only life he has is that which he receives from God.

In Paul’s mind, for the messenger of God, there is no escape from the process of dying for Christ in this life until we physically die and then live in eternity with Him. But the life that we do presently have is a manifestation of the life that He gives to us because of His own once-for-all death on the cross.

And it is for this life that Paul continues to carry with him, the dying of Jesus. It is necessary for Paul to do this if others are to receive this life from God; Paul must daily be dying so that others may live. This the super-apostles would never have been prepared to do.

There is a logical connection between Paul’s suffering and the spread of the gospel. In verses 10 and 11, Paul says that the death of Christ is manifested in his body “*so that Christ’s life might also be manifested.*” In verse 15, Paul writes that this is “*all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.*”

What was achieved on Calvary now has to be delivered to humanity worldwide and it will be done by people who accept suffering and self-sacrifice for Christ and His gospel as their way of life. Are *you* this kind of person? Are you prepared and ready to die so that others might live?

4. Paul’s sufferings bring an eternal perspective (4:16—5:10).

Knowing that his suffering brings glory to God gives Paul hope in this midst of his affliction (4:16). Suffering not only points the sufferer away from self and toward God, but it also points away from the terror of the present to the hope of the future. It causes us to gain perspective, realizing that this life is not all that there is, that there is a “not yet” aspect to God’s plan that has yet to be accomplished. Recognizing this, we do not lose hope. We look ahead to God’s final triumph over the power of death. Suffering reminds us that the battle is not over and keeps us from expecting what God has not yet promised. It creates in us a hunger for more. Persecution reminds us that we are not home yet.

In 5:1,2 Paul writes, “*Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.*”

This world is not our home. We groan, longing to be clothed with our renewed body (5:1,2). We yearn to be with the Lord (5:8). In preparation for that day, Paul lives with the aim of pleasing the Lord (5:9), knowing that he will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive his reward for faithfulness (5:10).

5. Paul's sufferings give credibility to his ministry (6:1–13).

Paul preaches a message of reconciliation of God to man (5:11–21). Because of the cross of Jesus, God and man can be reconciled. We bear this message of reconciliation as ambassadors of God imploring men and women to be reconciled to God (5:20).

With such a message, Paul wants to emphasize that his message of the cross and the *way* in which he carries out his ministry do not conflict with one another.

Canadian author Marshall McLuhan often noted that “the medium is the message.” The incarnation of Jesus was living proof of the truth of this statement. God lived among us. The method carried an incredibly powerful message of its own, even if Jesus had never uttered a word. Of course, He did speak and what He said coincided entirely with who and what He was and did.

The method one utilizes to proclaim a message impacts the message itself. It carries a message of its own, which can validate the message, diminish it, obscure it, or even contradict it. Take, for example, the message “Jesus loves you.” The message is good and true. Now, imagine that one takes this message and writes it on the wall of a public washroom. The message is still good and true, but the method being used to communicate the message makes it unlikely that anyone will take the message seriously. At best, the method is questionable. At worst, it diminishes the message to the level of obscenity and graffiti and is unworthy of Christ’s sacrificial expression of that love. The message would, undoubtedly, be impacted by such means.

Paul knew this and in 6:3, he declares that he is concerned that his ministry never causes someone to stumble, that his methodology and lifestyle not contradict the message he preached. “We preach a message that Jesus suffered and died for us,” Paul says. “We preach that because of Jesus’ self-sacrifice we can have peace with God (5:11–21). Thus I live a life that matches this message (unlike these “super-apostles”) so as not to cause a hindrance to people listening and accepting it and thus discrediting my ministry” (6:3).

“Rather,” in verse 4 he writes, “*as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way,*” and in the following verses he proceeds to describe how they are commended:

... by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and

dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:4–10)

This is how Paul's ministry is not discredited. Paul's suffering gives credibility to his ministry. His lifestyle of dying commends a message of life.

6. Paul's sufferings are proof that he is a messenger of God (11:23—12:10).

The most extensive description of all of Paul's afflictions for Christ's sake is found in 11:23—12:10. It is at this point that Paul directly challenges those in Corinth who deny his credentials as a true apostle of God.

He has shown how God's weakness in the cross of His Son, a weakness of suffering and self-sacrifice, turned out to be God's strength and power (1 Corinthians). He has maintained that his sufferings are linked with Christ (1 Corinthians 1:3–11) and it is the world that rejects the method by which God has chosen to reconcile the world to Himself and sees only the shame and apparent defeat. In contrast, those who are being saved see it as a fragrant offering to God (2:14–17). Paul contended that his sufferings are necessary to manifest the life of Christ (4:5–15) and argued that the messengers of the gospel must live lives in accordance with the gospel (6:1–13). Christ died on the cross for man's salvation, and cross-bearing messengers are those who will bear this message to mankind. God's methods are consistent with His message.

Yet, the Corinthians persist in listening to teachers whose message and methods are at odds with the cross of Christ. In verse 23 Paul asks, "Are they servants of Christ?" The Greek wording used here does not concede that he believes that the "super-apostles" really are servants of God. The wording is more: "Servants of God are they? Well, if they are such (and it would be absurd to say such), I am more!"

The term "servant of Christ" is reminiscent of Isaiah's reference to the suffering Servant and the servants of the suffering Servant. One cannot call himself a servant of God if he denies the need to sacrifice and suffer for Christ's sake. Suffering defines the servant of God.

In verses 23–30, Paul spells out the credentials he points to that prove he is a servant of God:

... with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from

*rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? **If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.** (emphasis added)*

Then in verses 31–33, Paul gives an example of the things that he will boast of:

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

As we noted in our study of Acts, immediately following his conversion, Paul began to preach the gospel. As a result, a plot to kill him was hatched and he was forced to flee Damascus through a hole in the wall (Acts 9:25). This experience drove home to him an incredible truth that he never forgot.

Paul might have been tempted to feel proud of his revelation from Christ and his dramatic testimony of conversion, from persecutor to messenger of God. But then he remembers that his first attempt to share the gospel resulted in his being lowered out of a window in the wall in the middle of the night in a basket that was probably used to dump rubbish outside the wall. Paul learned that this is what the messenger of God can expect!

What did *you* expect following Christ would be like when you first started following Him?

In chapter 12:1, Paul goes further. The super-apostles boast of the great visions that God has given them. “Well,” says Paul, “let me break a 14-year silence and tell you about visions and revelations from God that I have received.”

I suspect that at this point, the Corinthians would have leaned forward in eager anticipation of what Paul was about to write. This was the kind of message that they liked to listen to.

Paul refuses to go into too many details, however. He talks in verses 2–5 about having received a vision of heaven, but Paul is clearly embarrassed at having to boast at all (verse 1). He refers to himself as “a man in Christ” (in the third person) in order to emphasize that receiving this vision did not make him any special type of Christian.

All that Paul feels comfortable boasting about is his weaknesses (verse 5). And so he immediately discredits the wonderful vision that God had given him in verse

7: “So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated” (2 Corinthians 12:7).

The Thorn in the Flesh

The conjectures as to what Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was are legion. Many, if not most, commentators believe that was a physical ailment. I am inclined to think that we need to understand it in the context that Paul has just finished talking about and which he will refer to again in verse 10—a context of opposition and persecution for the sake of Christ.

The early church theologian Chrysostom took the term “Satan” in its general Hebrew sense of “adversary,” and understood this “messenger of Satan” by which he was buffeted to signify “Alexander the coppersmith, the party of Hymeneus and Philetas, and all the adversaries of the Word, those who contended with him and fought against him, those that cast him into prison, those that beat him, that led him away to death; for they did Satan’s business.”⁴⁰ Augustine, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, Photius, and Theophylact and other early church fathers also saw this in the same light.⁴¹

More recently, R. V. G. Tasker wrote in regard to this passage, “As there is nothing which tends to elate a Christian evangelist so much as the enjoyment of spiritual experiences, and as there is nothing so calculated to deflate the spiritual pride which may follow them as the opposition he encounters while preaching the Word, it is not unlikely that Chrysostom’s interpretation is nearer the truth than any other.”⁴²

However we understand it, the fact is that this “messenger of Satan” was sent by God; Satan has only a limited freedom of action. God is ultimately in control. Nothing comes into the life of the believer that does not first pass through the sovereign hands of God.

That is not to say that Paul did not want this suffering removed from his life:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (12:8,9a)

How exactly God said this to Paul, we are not told. The use of the perfect tense here, however, is illuminating, indicating that this was a past action with continuing results. In other words, what God told Paul regarding His grace being sufficient is still true for him at the time at which he is writing this letter. This was God’s answer to Paul’s prayer then and it still stands. And it is not a matter of accepting “second best.” In Paul’s mind, God’s grace in the midst of affliction is just as much an answer

to prayer as deliverance because he declares, *“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Corinthians 12:9b,10).

The key word here is, of course, *“for the sake of Christ.”* Paul did not purposely go seeking persecution. His only preoccupation was the cause of Christ, the spreading of the gospel, and these sufferings came to him as consequences of his pursuit after the purposes of God. There is nothing special in suffering for the sake of suffering. Suffering and persecution are only the natural results of spreading the gospel in a world that is hostile to God, the gospel, and His messengers.

Persecution reminds us who we belong to and proves that we truly are messengers of God.

Moses Xie

Moses Xie was born in 1918 in Jiangsu Province, China. He became a Christian at the age of fourteen. In the 1950s, as the director of the Chinese Christian Mission in Shanghai, he refused to join the Communist-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement. In May 1956, he was arrested and imprisoned for twenty-three years. During his initial interrogation after his arrest, he was handcuffed continually for 133 days. The cuffs were so tight that they cut through his skin into the bone. The guards pulled his hair, brutally kicked him with their boots, and continually pressured him to renounce his faith. During the torture, Xie would sometimes pray to God, “Lord, Lord, I am following you so closely. What is the meaning of this?”

The pain and constant torture was such that one night, in desperation, he attempted suicide. Still in handcuffs, he removed a lightbulb in his cell and shoved his fingers into the socket, hoping that the electrical shock would kill him. It didn’t. The cuffs somehow redirected the current, but his screams alerted the guards to what he had attempted to do.

As he lay in his wooden bed in his cell that night, he sobbed in prayer, filled with anguish and remorse. All of a sudden, he claims he heard a voice in Chinese saying, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Three times, these words were clearly repeated. Xie knew that his cellmates were asleep and that it would have been impossible for another prisoner to have said anything this loudly and clearly without a guard interrupting. To this day, he insists that God Himself spoke to him that night. “After this incident,” Xie testifies, “God’s grace was really strong. When I was beaten after this, I didn’t feel the pain.”

Of course, not feeling pain is not the sign of God’s grace being sufficient. Many persecuted Christians experience excruciatingly painful torture at the hands of their enemies. Yet, they too testify to the fact that God’s grace is sufficient when they have nothing else. In fact, they find that God’s grace is all that they need.⁴³

Romans

Probably no biblical text has been so painstakingly scrutinized as the book of Romans. The subject of why Paul wrote the book is especially contentious in scholarly circles. It is obvious that this is a church that Paul had not yet visited but which he hoped to in the near future. Most believe that it was written between A.D. 54 and 58, with A.D. 57–58 being the most probable dates.⁴⁴ It is unlikely that the church in Rome was undergoing any significant persecution at the time. Indeed, it is likely that the church there enjoyed a degree of imperial protection during these early years of Nero's reign.⁴⁵

The origin of the Roman church is uncertain. It is likely to have started through the influence of Jewish converts returning from the Pentecost of Acts 2, traveling merchants, or those who moved to Rome from other cities. Prior to their expulsion by order of Claudius from Rome in A.D. 49, the Jewish population of Rome was estimated to be forty to fifty thousand.⁴⁶ This expulsion undoubtedly had tremendous impact on the nature of the church in Rome.

First, it is almost certain that Claudius' order was due to disturbances among the Jews there regarding Jesus.⁴⁷ As early as A.D. 41, Claudius had wanted to expel the Jews from Rome because of their large numbers as well as the numbers of Romans who were converting to Judaism.⁴⁸ Recording the deeds of Claudius, the Roman historian Suetonius wrote, "He banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus."⁴⁹ It is generally accepted that "Chrestus" must mean "Christ" and that we have here evidence that the church in Rome, which was likely predominantly Jewish at the time, faced considerable opposition from their fellow Jews, just as Paul and most of his church plants experienced during his ministry. The resulting disturbance gave Claudius the excuse he needed to expel the Jews from Rome without causing undue public disorder.⁵⁰

This expulsion would have the effect of significantly changing the demographics of the Roman church. What had previously been a predominantly Jewish church now became a predominantly Gentile one. The Gentile converts would have had to establish their own leadership. They, in turn, would have evangelized their countrymen, resulting in a church that soon lost its Jewish roots, although many of them would have known the Jewish Scriptures, having likely been "God-fearers"—Gentiles who had worshiped as Jews but had never submitted to circumcision.⁵¹ As the church grew in the years that followed and as the Jews gradually began to return to Rome following the death of Claudius in A.D. 54, tension between the Jews and the Gentiles would have arisen over the different lifestyles of the Jewish and Gentile Christians (see 14:13–23).

It is obvious that the Roman church had also made inroads into the higher levels of society. In his letter to them, Paul mentions a man named Narcissus (16:11), who was possibly Tiberius Claudius Narcissus, a senior government officeholder under both emperors Tiberius and Claudius.⁵² Paul also greets the “household of Aristobulus,” a common name in the family of Herod the Great.⁵³

The Roman historian Tacitus reported that in A.D. 57 a “distinguished woman” Pomponia Graecina, the wife of Aulus Plautius, the conqueror of Britain, was accused of holding to “some foreign superstition and handed over to her husband’s judicial decision.”⁵⁴ It is likely that this “superstition” was faith in Christ, for in the second century, the family of Pomponia Graecina were practicing Christians and some of the family members were buried in one of Rome’s earliest Christian catacombs.⁵⁵ According to Tacitus, following ancient precedent, Plautius heard his wife’s cause in the presence of her family, since it involved her legal status and character, and concluded that she was innocent. For the next forty years, Pomponia explained her sober and restrained way of life as being “in mourning for a dear friend.” Sordi believes that this epitomizes the behavior of the early church in Rome—they tended to be cautious in letting others know of their identity as Christians.

It is worth noting that although many found aspects of Judaism attractive, there was also considerable hostility toward Jews in Roman society.⁵⁶ The Roman intelligentsia, in particular, was antagonistic against this and other foreign “superstitions” which they believed were weakening Rome’s allegiance to their ancient religion and values. Tacitus, in particular, savagely accused the Jews of profaning all that Romans held sacred and permitting all that they abhorred.⁵⁷ During the first half of the first century, we know of three separate official rulings against the Jews in Rome: the expulsion of the Jews under Tiberius in A.D. 19, the withdrawal of rights to assembly under Claudius in A.D. 41, and the expulsion by Claudius in A.D. 49. Often mistaken as Jews because of their common place of origin and the fact that most of the early converts were Jews, Christians of the time would have also been subject to some of the same accusations and societal prejudice. Additionally, at the time of Paul’s writing to the Romans, there was considerable anger over the issues of indirect taxation, and Jews were often suspected by tax collectors of tax evasion because of some of the special privileges that they had been granted for religious reasons. Instead of paying for the upkeep of the temples to the Roman deities, Jews were permitted to pay the temple tax instead. Christians, as part of an unrecognized religion, found themselves in the precarious position of not really wanting to pay taxes to either cause.⁵⁸

Hence, it is likely that Paul was writing to a church that, despite having Jewish Christians in their fellowship, avoided any real contact with the Jewish community

until at least A.D. 56.⁵⁹ When he arrived in Rome a couple of years after writing this letter, we find a situation where there is little or no friction between Christians and Jews (Acts 28:22). It appears from the book of Philippians, which he wrote from Rome, that the lack of conflict may have been because of their avoidance of propagating the faith to any great extent among either the Jewish or the Gentile population.⁶⁰ Paul reports to the Philippians that his presence in Rome has motivated the believers there to be more bold in their witness (Philippians 1:12–18). It is unlikely, in my opinion, that Paul was unaware of this problem when he wrote his epistle to the Romans with its powerful declaration that sets the stage for the entire letter: “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek*” (Romans 1:16). He is not ashamed to identify with the message of Christ; neither should the Roman believers be. They need to be more active in taking this message of reconciliation to both Jew and Gentile.

Of course, with its emphasis on the proclamation of the gospel in a world in rebellion against God, it is not surprising that Paul should also make reference to persecution, especially since it appears this is something that the church there had tried to avoid.

It is in chapters 5 and 8 that Paul specifically refers to the persecution that those who are not ashamed of the gospel will face.

1. Persecution produces qualities in us that prepare us for glory (5:3–5).

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3–5)

Prior to this passage, Paul had been talking about the peace with God that we have through faith and how as Christians we rejoice in “*hope of the glory of God*” (verse 2). Our rejoicing, however, does not end with the simple attainment of eternal life, Paul says. We rejoice in our sufferings and persecution because we know that through them, God develops the qualities in us that prepare us for glory. We have already discussed how it is through persecution that we prove our “worthiness” for our inheritance, our ability to handle the responsibilities that God waits to give us. Persecution, however, also prepares us for the responsibilities and privileges that we will inherit, so that we will not be “put to shame.”

2. Persecution is part of what it means to “live in the Spirit” in a hostile world (8:16–39).

This passage naturally divides into three sections:

- a) 8:16,17
- b) 8:18–30
- c) 8:31–39

Romans 8:16,17

When we became children of God, Paul says in verse 16, He gave us His Spirit who witnesses to us that we truly are God’s children, His heirs, and fellow heirs with Christ. But then the apostle adds an interesting condition in verse 17 that many miss in their study of this passage:

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, **provided we suffer with him** in order that we may also be glorified with him. (emphasis added)*

Our inheritance, Paul says, is contingent on our suffering with Christ. There is no sharing in Christ’s glory unless there is a sharing in His sufferings.⁶¹ If Christ was appointed to suffer in order to be glorified (Luke 24:26; see also Philippians 2:6–11; 1 Peter 1:11), so too those who are heirs with Him. To be in Christ is to share not only His Sonship but also His rejection and death. In a world that does not know Him as Lord, such suffering is inescapable for those who would faithfully follow Him.

Our readiness to follow Him to death in our work to fulfill His purposes on earth is evidence of the reality of our faith, demonstrating our readiness to receive our inheritance in the future. Our partnership with Him in this life qualifies us and makes us worthy of partnership with Him in eternity.

Some scholars express a concern that such a view of rewards conflicts with Paul’s teachings on justification by faith and on rewards. The common tendency is to downplay the concept of rewards until it means virtually nothing at all.

Josef Ton is helpful in his explanation:

Protestant theologians have been suspicious of an inconsistency in Paul’s theology in this regard precisely because they have not had a clear understanding of the content of heavenly rewards. When rewards are seen for what they are, that is, when they are seen as the receiving of our inheritance, which entails being put in charge over God’s possessions and being given higher or lower positions of ruling and authority in the kingdom of heaven, then it becomes obvious that God does not expect His children to *earn* these rewards!

The rewards that God has in store for His children are designated to them *by His grace*. The issue is not to acquire merit in order to obligate God to give us something in exchange. Before time began, God had already decided to give this inheritance to His children. He predestined men and women to be rulers over His creation even before He created them. The issue is that God decided to build in men and women a character like His own, to fashion them in His own image; furthermore, He decided to form that character in them in the crucible of the difficulties of earthly existence. At the end of the process, God wants to see in each of His children a blameless, unselfish, self-giving, enduring, faithful, and obedient character. This is what is well-pleasing to Him, and this is His conception of a mature person who is worthy of being entrusted with the great and glorious position of ruling and authority in His eternal kingdom.⁶²

We have been called to be fellow-sufferers with Christ, to align our goals with His goals, our purposes with His purposes, and His method of the cross with our method of ministry. We must manifest Him and His life in us, spreading the grace of His salvation at the price of our own comfort, and even the price of our own lives.

Romans 8:18–30

However much we suffer for Christ, Paul notes, is not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (verse 18). Nature, itself, joins us in anxiously awaiting this day when we will receive our inheritance as sons. It groans with us as we go through persecution and suffering for His sake. We look forward in anticipation to what awaits us.

But we still groan. Persecution is suffering. The “present” time is a time of groaning.⁶³ All nature groans together (sunwdijneij, verse 22); Christians groan (stenazomen, verse 23) for the adoption as sons, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groanings (stenagmoi-, verse 26). We are not left alone in our groaning.

The Spirit helps us in our weakness (verse 26). There are times when we do not know how to pray. But just as Jesus promised that the Spirit would give us the words to say before kings and authorities (Matthew 10:19), so the Spirit Himself prays for us when, in the midst of our afflictions, our feelings are so deep that we cannot even utter a word before the Father. He intercedes on our behalf, interceding according to the will of God (verse 27).

We are confident, we *know* that God is able to cause all things to work together for our good. By all things, I believe that Paul is referring to persecution and suffering with Christ as His joint heirs (verse 17).

The “we know” (oijdamen) of verse 28 is contrasted with “we know not” (ouk oijdamen) of verse 26 and made possible by the “He knows” (oiden) of verse 27. We

may not know how we ought to pray at the time of persecution, but the Spirit knows, and we know that God's plans for us are never thwarted by suffering and persecution.

Hence, if asked, "Is persecution a good thing?" we answer, "No, but God is able to cause it to work together for our good and God's glory. It is the means by which we will be made ready to receive our inheritance."

God's plan has never been and will never ultimately be hindered because of persecution or suffering. He has chosen to use it to help us to become the type of people that He predestined us to be—people whose character is like that of His Son (verse 29). He began this process as He called us to Himself, justified us, and glorified us. The past tenses used in verses 29,30 are noteworthy. While our glorification is still not a present reality for us, it is so certain in Paul's mind that it is spoken of in the past, as God, in His foreknowledge, predestined that we would be conformed, through persecution, into the image of His Son, which will reach its completion in our glorification. This glorification is a foregone conclusion. It will happen because God is in control.

How God is able to cause all things to work together for good for those who love Him (8:28) may not, however, be seen in this life. These words are in a context of God's coming eschatological glory and Christian hope. It is the grand scheme of history that the believer will be able to look back in hindsight and say with certainty that truly God was able to turn even persecution to serve His ends in the life of His children. The hope for the believer today in the face of suffering that may seem meaningless is, in the words of Beker, "grounded and nourished by the imminent triumph of God."⁶⁴

This should provide great encouragement to those undergoing persecution. If we share in Christ's suffering, we are assured of a share in His glory (verse 17). Thus, no matter how severe the tribulations, we are "super-conquerors" (υπερνικωμεν) through Him who loved us (verse 37; see also 5:5–10).

Two great hymns of the Church express these truths with remarkable beauty and strength. The first is the Reformation chorale, "Let Us Ever Walk With Jesus," written in 1653 as it emphasizes our intimate identification with Christ both in suffering and in glory:

Let us suffer here with Jesus,
To His image, e'er conform;
Heaven's glory soon will please us,
Sunshine follow on the storm.
Though we sow in tears of sorrow,
We shall reap with heavenly joy;

And the fears that now annoy
 Shall be laughter on the morrow.
 Christ, I suffer here with Thee;
 There, oh, share Thy joy with me!

Let us also die with Jesus.
 His death from the second death,
 From our soul's destruction, frees us,
 Quickens us with life's glad breath.

Let us mortify, while living,
 Flesh and blood and die to sin;
 And the grave that shuts us in
 Shall but prove the gate to heaven.

Jesus, here I die to Thee
 There to live eternally.

Let us gladly live with Jesus;
 Since He's risen from the dead,
 Death and grave must soon release us.

Jesus, Thou art now our Head,
 We are truly Thine own members;
 Where Thou livest, there live we.
 Take and own us constantly,
 Faithful Friend, as Thy dear brethren.

Jesus, here I live to Thee,
 Also there eternally.⁶⁵

The classic English hymn "Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken," written by Henry Francis Lyte, closely parallels the thought of this segment of Romans 8, promising glory after suffering and urging dependence upon God:

Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee.
 Destitute, despised, forsaken, Thou from hence my all shall be.
 Perish every fond ambition, all I've sought or hoped or known.
 Yet how rich is my condition! God and heaven are still mine own.

Let the world despise and leave me, they have left my Savior, too.
 Human hearts and looks deceive me; Thou art not, like them, untrue.
 And while Thou shalt smile upon me, God of wisdom, love and might,
 Foes may hate and friends disown me, show Thy face and all is bright.

Go, then, earthly fame and treasure! Come, disaster, scorn and pain!
 In Thy service, pain is pleasure; with Thy favor, loss is gain.
 I have called Thee, “Abba, Father”; I have set my heart on Thee:
 Storms may howl, and clouds may gather, all must work for good to me.

Man may trouble and distress me, ’twill but drive me to Thy breast.
 Life with trials hard may press me; heaven will bring me sweeter rest.
 Oh, ’tis not in grief to harm me while Thy love is left to me;
 Oh, ’twere not in joy to charm me, were that joy unmixed with Thee.

Take, my soul, thy full salvation; rise o’er sin, and fear, and care;
 Joy to find in every station something still to do or bear:
 Think what Spirit dwells within thee; what a Father’s smile is thine;
 What a Savior died to win thee, child of heaven, shouldst thou repine?

Haste then on from grace to glory, armed by faith, and winged by prayer,
 Heaven’s eternal day’s before thee, God’s own hand shall guide thee there.
 Soon shall close thy earthly mission, swift shall pass thy pilgrim days;
 Hope soon change to glad fruition, faith to sight, and prayer to praise.⁶⁶

Romans 8:31–39

In light of all these things (verses 18–30), Paul exclaims in 8:31–39,

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?
 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not
 also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s
 elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—
 more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is
 interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or
 distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,
 “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be
 slaughtered.”*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor
 things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
 will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

These verses are not a promise to those who are living in sin as a promise of eternal security. The context demands that we recognize that this is a promise to those who are suffering with Jesus, who are giving everything for Him. The promise

is that nothing they will face from the outside can destroy their faith. Our persecutors may say what they will. They may charge us with whatever crime they can imagine. They can kill us, starve us, and torture us. They can slaughter our loved ones before our eyes. They can leave us to rot in chains in prisons deep or humiliate us in the public marketplace. Nothing, however, can take us away from God. What the world means for ill are the very things that God will use to prepare us for glory!

Galatians

It would appear from Galatians 6:12 that, as in Corinth, there were those among the Galatians who were twisting the message of the gospel in order to avoid being persecuted by the Judaizers:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.

Just like in Corinth, Paul refuses to boast to the Galatians except about the cross: “*But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*” (Galatians 6:14).

He concludes the letter with a most interesting phrase in Galatians 6:17: “*From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*”

Paul considers the scars from his torture and persecution to be Christ’s brand upon him, marking him as a slave. It is not circumcision that marks him as belonging to Christ, Paul says, but the scars of persecution incurred in the cause of the gospel of Jesus.

“Stop trying to change this gospel,” Paul pleads with the Galatians. “Those who want to avoid persecution remove the cross, but Christ’s cross is central to the gospel and bringing you the gospel necessitated carrying the cross.” To share the message of the cross-centered gospel always requires cross-carrying messengers.

Ephesians

As with Galatians, the book of Ephesians is a book with not a lot of overt teaching on persecution. Persecution is assumed, however, and this should not be surprising especially as we remember that Paul writes this letter as a prisoner for Christ (3:1; 4:1). He refuses, though, to see himself as a victim of either the Jews or the Romans; he is a prisoner because he chose to follow Christ. He is a prisoner of Jesus, not of Rome. It is part of his identity as a follower of Christ.

Ephesians 3:1

In 3:1 Paul says he is “a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” and in 3:13 he urges them “not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.”

In both phrases he uses the same Greek phrase *uper umwh* (on your behalf).

Two points are worth remembering. First, Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem in Acts 21 was on account of an Ephesian convert, Trophimus, who had probably joined Paul just prior to departing for Jerusalem from Ephesus (Acts 20). Paul was arrested when the Jews believed he had taken Trophimus into the temple, thereby defiling it. The Ephesians were undoubtedly aware of the circumstances of Paul’s arrest.

Second, Paul was arrested specifically because of his championship of the Gentile cause. The Ephesians know that Paul’s bringing the gospel to the Gentiles and his affiliation with them has cost him his freedom and may cost him his life. Paul recognizes that this is the cost of fulfilling the ministry of Christ, as he reminded the Ephesians in Acts 20:24.

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

A major theme of the book of Ephesians is the unity of the Church, Jew and Gentile. The relation between Jews and Gentiles in the kingdom of God was one of the most basic concerns in Paul’s thought.⁶⁷ In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul carefully explains how bringing together all those who trust in Him was the plan of God from the very beginning (2:11–18; 3:6). God preplanned, from before the creation of the world, to have a Church of those who were “like Christ” and this plan, though once hidden, is no longer a secret mystery but fully revealed in the gospel of Christ (Ephesians 1:9; 3:7–12). This is good news and reveals the mystery that God desires all nations (Jews and Gentiles) to be His chosen people, made known even to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (3:10).⁶⁸ This wonderful message is one that the elect are commissioned to share with all people everywhere. It is for upholding and proclaiming this revealed mystery in word, thought, and practice that Paul has become a prisoner.

Paul reminds the Ephesians that his imprisonment is “their glory” (3:13). Here again we see Paul typically juxtaposing suffering and glory. Paul’s suffering brings the Gentile believers the experience of glory.⁶⁹ Put another way, because of his imprisonment, they now experience freedom. He is suffering in their behalf (3:13).⁷⁰

When the Ephesians had last seen Paul, they had wept and been sorrowful because he had told them that they would never see him again (Acts 20:38). He had reminded them of the persecution he had suffered because of his inclusive gospel

(20:17–21), warned them of coming troubles both for himself (20:22–27) and for them (20:28–31), and had committed them to God and prayed for them before departing for Jerusalem (20:32–37). Now in Ephesians 3:13 he urges them not to lose heart because of his imprisonment. He is praying for them (3:13–19) just as he had prayed for them on the beach before leaving for his arrest. He is praying that they would be rooted and established, grasping the love of Christ in its fullness. He was praying that nothing can overwhelm them so as to uproot or tear down those grounded in His love (see Romans 8:28,29).

Ephesians 4:1

As a prisoner for the Lord (4:1), Paul speaks from experience and with a degree of authority that those in Ephesus should heed. He knows that when facing opposition, one might be inclined to shy away from the faith or fellowship with other believers in order to avoid persecution. Instead, Paul urges the members of the church to live a life that is “*worthy*” of the calling to which they are called (4:1).

What does it mean to live a life “worthy of the calling to which we are called”?

As we have studied, before the foundation of the world, God chose His Church consisting of all those who put their trust in Him—Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female—to join Him in fulfilling His purposes. This is the calling to which we have been called. To live worthy of this calling is to live in such a way that is consistent with it. This, to Paul, is to live in unity (4:2–16). We are one Church, Jew and Gentile. This theological truth should find expression in practical living.

How contrary to the gospel for which Christ died that those who are called to be part of one Body should be divided, Paul argues. It is a violation of the very thing for which Christ died and for which Paul is a prisoner.

If Paul had refused to acknowledge the unity of the Church, he would not have been imprisoned. It was because of his insistence that there is only one people of God, made up of both Jew and Gentile, that Paul was repeatedly persecuted and eventually arrested in Jerusalem. He urges the Ephesians to not deny this truth by being divided among themselves.

Ephesians 6:10–20

“*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*” In 6:10, Paul begins to bring to conclusion his letter to the Ephesians with words of encouragement needed to stand firm in a hostile world. He returns to the theme of divine power introduced in 1:19–21.⁷¹ Christ has triumphed over powers at work in this present age (1:21; 2:2; 3:10) and His exaltation provides the energy that is at work in the believers and in the ministry of the imprisoned apostle (3:7).⁷²

Paul now summarizes the main themes of the letter in 6:10–20 in a way to evoke an emotional response in the audience.⁷³ If what he has said in the previous chapters is true, then this is how the Ephesians should live in the face of any opposition that they may face. Paul sets the task in a cosmic context to help them to gain perspective, using battle imagery to urge the readers to stand firm against the evil powers arrayed against them.⁷⁴ The passage divides into three parts:

1. In 6:10–13, Paul exhorts the readers to be strong and reminds them that they derive their strength from the Lord and His power. The power to stand in the face of persecution is not self-induced. The context of the battle is ultimately a spiritual one—a battle where the believers are on the side of God against Satan. The battle is not against human enemies from God’s perspective, but against powers led by the adversary, the accuser of the brethren. In other passages (1:21; 3:10), Paul has already referred to “rulers” (αἰχ) and “authorities” (ἐξουσία). Now he expands the list with new terms and in doing so conveys the sense that powers of evil pervade the world.⁷⁵ God’s power, however, is superior to any such forces.

The expression “*strength of his power*” (6:10) may be an allusion to the rendering of Isaiah 40:26 in the Septuagint in which Isaiah refers to the creative power of God in bringing forth the universe and its heavenly bodies.⁷⁶ It is this strength that is actually available to the believer in the face of hostility in the “evil day” (verse 13).⁷⁷ The call then, for the believer, is to take upon himself all the resources that God has provided for him. There is no need for the believer to fail to stand; God has provided for him everything he needs (see 2 Peter 1:3).

2. In 6:14–17, Paul begins with the imperative “stand.” This sums up the main thrust of what Paul wants to see the Ephesians do in the face of opposition and hostility. Truthfulness and moral integrity (the belt) will provide support and brace the believer. Doing right and practicing justice (the breastplate) will give essential protection. Being in a state of readiness by living out the peace produced by the gospel (the sandals) is the best preparation for combat against powers determined to produce disunity.⁷⁸ A trust and dependence upon God and His resources (the shield) offer full protection from every attack that the enemy can throw the believer’s way.

In verse 17, the syntax changes from those things the believer is to take up to those things which he receives (δέωσθη)⁷⁹ when handed to him. Both salvation and the Word⁸⁰ are things that are given to us, rather than qualities that the believer is to develop. The believer has been delivered from the dominion of the

ruler of darkness (helmet of salvation) and can move on the offensive (the sword) in delivering others from captivity as the gospel is preached under the penetrating power of the Spirit.

3. In verses 18–20, Paul makes clear that the appropriation of the divine armor of God and standing firm in the battle require a life of dependence upon God in prayer.⁸¹ The believer is called to stay alert with prayers guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit (“in the Spirit”), being careful to not only pray for one’s own strengthening but also pray for others. In particular, the Ephesians are to pray for Paul as he is in prison for the sake of the gospel (verse 19).

The tone of triumph and victory in verses 13–18 is tempered with verses 19,20 as the emphasis shifts to the imprisoned apostle. Paul does not anticipate release. Yet, he does not see his imprisonment as a defeat or contradiction to the victorious tone in the previous verses. His imprisonment has raised him from being a prisoner to an ambassador in chains (verse 20).

Given the typical horrible prison conditions of Paul’s day, this would appear to be an oxymoron.⁸² An ambassador could not be imprisoned by those to whom he was sent, normally having diplomatic immunity. However, for Paul, serving as an ambassador for a suffering Savior, this would have been most appropriate. He most accurately reflects his sending government when he is in chains. Prison provides him with the opportunity of performing his ambassadorial duties of proclaiming the message of his King. He urges the Ephesians to pray that he would do so fearlessly (as any good ambassador would). He (and they) must resist the temptation to see themselves as a persecuted, defeated small group that needs to hide away in the face of opposition. They are ambassadors of a King with an incredible message to deliver to the rulers of this world and their subjects held in captivity.

Philippians

As is commonly affirmed, one of the dominant themes of Philippians is joy. It is therefore surprising to some to learn that this book also contains some of Paul’s most significant teachings on persecution and suffering. Yet, this is perfectly consistent with Jesus’ admonition to “rejoice and be glad” when persecuted for His sake (Matthew 5:6).

Philippians 1

Paul begins his letter to the Philippians by thanking God for them in verses 3–6 as he acknowledges that they have been in a partnership with him in the gospel from

the very beginning of their coming to Christ (1:4,5). This partnership has meant “*striving side by side for the faith of the gospel*” (1:27) in the midst of violent opposition (1:28). Indeed it has been the active spreading of the gospel by the Philippian believers that has resulted in their being granted the privilege (or “grace”) of not only believing in Christ but also of suffering for Christ’s sake (1:29,30).

In verse 29, Paul uses the verb form of *caris*, commonly translated “grace” or “gift.” This is rather unusual. Verse 29 can be literally translated, “It has been graced to you (*umîn eparisqh*) for the sake of Christ not only in Him to believe, but also for His sake to suffer.” Paul is saying that not only are the Philippians recipients of the gift of eternal life, but they have also received the divine gift or grace of suffering for Christ. God offers both to them in love.

In verse 7 Paul says, “*It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*” What is of interest is the way that Paul speaks of grace in verse 7. The thought here is identical to that in verse 29. Paul is saying that the Philippians are partners with him in the grace of both being imprisoned and in defending the gospel even when in chains. Paul’s present situation is a result of being a messenger for God, His servant. The Philippians are in a similar situation; they too are suffering for their participation in spreading the gospel. They, like Paul, are partakers of the grace of suffering for Jesus.

Grace in this sense is God’s work of transforming us through persecution into sacrificial givers to others, equipping us to sacrificial involvement in the cause of Christ and His gospel. Paul develops this thought further in chapter 2 when he turns our attention to the example of Jesus and His willingness to sacrifice for us.

For many of us, the thought that persecution and suffering can be a gracious gift from God is foreign. We tend to think of grace as something that we freely receive. We are unaccustomed to think that grace is also something meant to transform us into being not only grateful receivers of the free gift of salvation but also sacrificial givers of this same gospel to others.⁸³

What Paul wanted to communicate to the Philippians was that they had initially been given the grace to believe in Christ (the grace of salvation); but then, they were also given this new grace, the grace of suffering for Christ, through their involvement and participation in the battle for the spreading of the gospel.⁸⁴

Suffering for Christ is a gift of grace, to be embraced with as much gratitude and joy as the gift of salvation. We can have a part in the plan of God of bringing the world to Christ. As we embrace the gift of salvation, we do so as those who also have the privilege of receiving the gift of persecution. The two are truly inseparable

in Paul's mind. No wonder the early church considered it a privilege to suffer for His sake (Acts 5:41).

Paul wants the Philippians to understand just what a wonderful gift this is. In verses 12–26 he explains how sharing the grace of suffering for Christ has had several benefits for him and others in Rome:

1. His imprisonment and suffering made an impact on non-Christians in Rome (1:12,13).

Because of his imprisonment, Paul says, the entire imperial guard and “all the rest” (whatever that means) know that he is not in chains for being a criminal but because of his allegiance to Christ.

2. His imprisonment and suffering made an impact on Christians in Rome (1:14–18a).

Those who witnessed Paul's imprisonment had learned to trust the Lord in a new way, not only when things went well, but also when they faced hardships and rejection. Many in Rome had been transformed into courageous personal evangelists and this was good reason to rejoice. Some, of course, may not have been sharing the gospel with the purest of motives, but this is of secondary concern to Paul. The fact is, his chains have helped motivate the Christians of Rome to be effective witnesses.

3. His imprisonment and suffering made an impact on Paul's priorities (1:18b–26).

Paul faced death many times in his life. In 1 Corinthians 15:31 he had declared, “I die daily.” As he writes these words, he expresses the conviction that he is prepared to die now and he is prepared to live. Paul did not want to die simply because it would be “very much better” for him personally (1:23). His life is in God's hands. He is ready to accept whatever would have maximum effectiveness for the cause of Christ. That is what he wants. His ultimate goal is to glorify God through either life or death.

In a book so replete with joy in the midst of affliction, it is obvious that joy is not conditional upon one's circumstances; it is dependent upon one's priorities.

Philippians 2

In chapter 2, Paul further develops the thought of what it means to be a sacrificial giver of grace to others, as he considers the example of our Savior. The first several verses of Philippians 2 are a direct attack on self-centered living. Self-centeredness is the exact opposite of what Christ exemplified.⁸⁵

Rather than seeing His equality with God as being something to selfishly grasp, Jesus understood that the nature of deity was to be self-giving.⁸⁶ He willingly emptied Himself, took the form of a servant, and humbled Himself to the point of death (2:5–8). This, Paul says, is to be the attitude of each of those who are Christ's followers (verse 5).⁸⁷

Because Jesus suffered, Paul says, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name (2:9). Here again, we see Paul's linking of suffering and glory. For Christ, His suffering resulted in glory. Paul does not draw a parallel in this passage to show how that is also true for the believer, but it is not unreasonable to assume that the readers would have understood that, as it is a typical Pauline teaching, as we have already seen.

In the following verses (2:12–16) Paul urges the Philippians to live in the self-sacrificial way that Christ has exemplified for them, shining forth as lights in a dark world (verse 15), "*holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain*" (verse 16). Their faithfulness to the example of Christ will be evidence to Paul that his ministry was not a failure.

In 2:17,18, Paul resumes the discussion that he began in chapter 1 referring to his own possible martyrdom (1:21–26) when he says, "*Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.*"

Some object that Paul cannot be referring to his martyrdom in 2:17,18 because of the note of joy contained in these verses. It would be as if Paul were saying that he is glad and rejoices with the Philippians that he is about to be put to death. Moises Silva answers, however:

Is there anything more characteristic of Philippians than Paul's juxtaposing of joy and adversity? Paul's words in 1:18–20 are particularly relevant here, for that passage too contains a repetition of *cairw* (v.18), and the joy in view is not affected by the possibility of death (*ei tē dia; zwh' ei tē dia; qanaitou*, v. 20).⁸⁸

In fact, the sacrificial language used here indicates that Paul sees his death as making the sacrifice of the Philippians complete.⁸⁹

Philippians 3

In verse 2 of chapter 3, Paul warns the Philippians to watch out for those who would come to them with a message that would take away from the gospel of grace. Paul points out that if anyone could have been made righteous by works, it was he. He had all the credentials that his Jewish opponents would value. But Paul does not value them; he considers them rubbish. Only knowing Christ has any lasting value

to him. He has lost everything for Christ's sake but holds no value to what he has lost. It has been no real sacrifice when he considers what he has gained in Christ. His only value now is to gain Christ and to be found in Him, having a righteousness that comes through faith in Him and not through one's own achievements (verse 9).

In verses 10 and 11, Paul returns to the theme of knowing Christ that he left in verse 8. To understand the details of verses 10 and 11, we need to note two things about their structure. First, Paul almost certainly does not intend that we know three separate things: Christ, the power of His resurrection, and participation in His sufferings. Rather, we learn to know Christ by knowing the power of the resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings. Paul's desire is that we know Christ. The power of the resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings are the means to this goal.

Second, Paul deliberately uses in these verses a chiasmus. In 3:10,11, Paul follows up the first two clauses in verse 10 with two further clauses in verses 10,11 which pick up (in reverse order) and reemphasize how Paul will know Christ by participating in Christ's resurrection and suffering.

that I may know Him

A – both the power of His resurrection

B – and sharing His sufferings

B' – being like Him in His death

A' – that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead

Christ's resurrection (line A) is the means whereby Paul is enabled to endure triumph over suffering (B), just as Christ did. To *know Christ* in the present means "being like Him in His death" (line B'), to die a death like His, so that, like his Master, he may hope to attain the resurrection from the dead.

This last clause is puzzling. It is clear that whatever Paul meant by the phrase "resurrection from the dead," he was unsure that he would attain it. The Greek words, *ei|pw~* (translated "if, by any means") cannot reasonably be construed in any other way except as conveying a sense of uncertainty.⁹⁰ Whatever this "resurrection" is, it is by no means a certainty.

The term translated "resurrection" is not the normal Greek term for resurrection (*anastasi~*). Instead, Paul uses a word that he uses nowhere else in his writing: *e|kanastasi~*, which might be translated "out-resurrection." The question to be answered is, "What kind of 'resurrection' is Paul referring to here?"

Elsewhere in his writings, Paul expresses confidence in his resurrection from the dead (e.g., Romans 8:38,39; 1 Corinthians 15). It would appear that whatever Paul

hopes to gain in 3:11 was something other than the normal resurrection of all believers from the dead. It is a prize to be attained, not like salvation which is a gift of grace (3:14). This resurrection is gained by knowing Christ through the power of His resurrection and sharing in His suffering, even to the point of death.

To assist us in identifying what Paul is speaking of in 3:11, it is helpful to examine 3:14 as well, where Paul says that he presses on “*toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” The word used here for “prize” is an interesting one. It is *brabeion* (brabeion) and is found in the New Testament only twice—here and in 1 Corinthians 9:24. In the latter passage Paul writes: “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.*” Most commentators agree that 1 Corinthians 9:24 refers to eternal rewards which believers can obtain for faithfulness in this life. It is very likely, therefore, that the only other use of the term in Philippians 3:14 carries the same meaning.

A comparison of the two passages proves that this is a valid interpretation. Both concern a prize which Paul suggests that believers should hope to obtain, one which can be won through faithfulness in this life (see also Matthew 6:19–21).

With this in mind, we may conclude that the “resurrection” referred to in Philippians 3:11 does not refer to the general resurrection of the dead, but to a special “resurrection” of those who have been faithful even until death. Hebrews 11:35 is instructive here as it speaks of believers who “were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a *better resurrection.*” All believers will be resurrected, but there is a better one for those who endure to the end. They were faithful in much and will be rewarded accordingly with special privileges and responsibilities. The emphasis of this “resurrection” is on rewards and responsibilities, not eternal life.

Paul says in verse 12 that he has certainly not known Christ in this way fully or obtained this resurrection yet, but he pushes forward (verse 13) to that prize with faithfulness in mind (verse 14). This is his goal, and his encouragement to the Philippians is that they ought to think this way too (verse 15).

In 3:16, Paul seems to be calling them to live in keeping with how they had followed Christ before they received this letter. They had been on the right track and he wants them to continue. Expanding on what he wrote in verse 15, Paul urges the Philippians, “*Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*”

The apostle knows that he is not writing anything particularly new (3:1), but he feels no hesitation to keep reminding them of these truths, because it is apparent that there are some who are not walking in this way (3:18,19). He weeps as he thinks of them because they display a “*mindset*” (3:19) at odds with Paul’s (3:15). They are walking as “*enemies of the cross*” (verse 18). They have abandoned the pur-

suit of the heavenly prize. They live with a mentality that says, “I will enjoy this life and all that it offers.” They refuse to walk the path of the cross—the path of sacrifice so that others might be blessed. Their minds are not fixed on the “out-resurrection” (3:11) or the prize (3:14) but on what this world offers (3:19).

The language of the first phrase in verse 19 cannot be softened to mean anything other than eternal destruction. Where they could have life, these people choose destruction. Instead of glorying in suffering, they glory in that which they should be ashamed of (3:19). Their “*mind is set on earthly things.*” This is the crux of the indictment.

Who are these people in verses 18–20? It is difficult to tell. They may be those who have apostatized in the face of persecution. They may be some who have abandoned Paul in the face of his imprisonment and persecution and adopted a “this world” mindset. More likely is the suggestion that they are itinerant ministers (the “super-apostles”) like those who frequented Corinth and against whom Paul felt compelled to stand.

In 3:20,21, Paul reminds the Philippians, “*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.*” The people of Philippi took great pride in their having been made a Roman colony by Caesar Augustus, which brought the privileges and prestige of Roman citizenship. In 1:27 Paul had urged them to behave as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ. Now he reminds the believers in Philippi that although they are Roman citizens, their real citizenship is in heaven, as they wait for a “*Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*” One of the primary titles for the Roman emperor was “lord and savior.” Paul’s words are a direct challenge to this claim. For the Christian, their primary loyalty is to a Savior and Lord who will bring everything under His subjection, even the mighty Roman emperor and all who afflict God’s Church!

Colossians

The key passage for Paul’s teaching on persecution in Colossians is 1:21–29:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to

me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

As we find in so many of his writings, in Colossians 1:21–29 Paul links the proclamation of the gospel message of reconciliation between God and man, with the necessity of *suffering* by those messengers of God who were involved in the ministry of sharing this message. This was a cost that Paul was perfectly prepared to pay so that others might come to know Christ. Are you prepared to pay it?

In verses 21–23, Paul says to the Colossians, “You who were once God’s enemies have been reconciled to God, to the end that, should you continue in the faith (and he presupposes the possibility that they may not), you will be presented holy and blameless and above reproach.” There is an interesting parallel between Colossians 1:21–29 and Ephesians 5:25–32, as noted by Ton.⁹¹ This is most clearly seen in Colossians 1:28,29 and Ephesians 5:29.

COLOSSIANS 1:28,29	EPHESIANS 5:29
Christ died in order that the Colossians might be presented before Him, holy and blameless and above reproach.	Christ gave Himself up for the Church that He might present her to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.
Paul writes that he preaches and teaches to the end that he will have the privilege of presenting every man complete in Christ. <i>For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.</i>	Christ Himself works towards this, as He <i>nourishes and cherishes her.</i>

What is clear is that Paul has no difficulty in saying that Christ’s work is his work and that his work is the work of Christ.⁹² This goal of Christ in Colossian 1:22 of reconciling sinners and sanctifying and perfecting them does not take place in a vacuum. But Christ does not do this work alone. He works through those who voluntarily take His goal and make it theirs. Nor it is achieved easily. It demands hard labor and agony (1:29). As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:28,29: “*And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?*” In Galatians

4:19, he refers to the believers there as *“my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!”* The work of the servant of God is not an easy one, nor should we expect it to be.

Yet, it is not a depressing work. Paul says, surprisingly, in Colossians 1:24: *“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.”* Then he writes something that at first glance appears startling: *“and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”*

How can Paul say that something was lacking in Christ’s afflictions?

First of all, it is to be emphasized that Paul is not talking about Jesus’ suffering on the cross. Krister Stendahl explains, “Of course, neither Paul—nor indeed anyone else—could add anything to the work fulfilled once for all on Calvary.”⁹³ It is not suffering for sin that Paul is talking about. He is suffering for some other purpose related to Christ’s body, the Church.

Earlier we referred to Paul’s use of the term “the suffering of Christ” in Philipians 3:10 (παθηματα του cristou). In Colossians 1:24 we have a slightly different, but synonymous phrase των κληρωτων του cristou. It is essential to note that Paul never uses either of these phrases to refer to Jesus’ redemptive work on the cross.⁹⁴ When referring to the redemptive act of Christ, Paul uses the concepts of “blood,” “cross,” and “death.” He only uses the phrases παθηματα του cristou⁹⁵ and των κληρωτων του cristou in the context of explaining his own suffering for Christ and the suffering experienced by the followers of Jesus for His sake and the sake of His Church.

It is obvious that in Paul’s mind, the sufferings of Jesus, through His Church and in Paul’s own life, are not complete. In his own body, Paul experiences and fulfills these “sufferings” of behalf of the Church, which is the body of Christ. In the afflictions that come upon the apostle, there is a continuation of the sufferings that Christ suffered. Stendahl notes:

In Colossians 1:24, Paul’s ministry in its weakness, its martyrological suffering, is seen as having the same nature as the afflictions of Christ, afflictions that “continue” in the church and are thereby completed (cf. also 2 Cor. 13:3,4).⁹⁶

Paul’s sufferings take place in the wholly concrete sense—as the context plainly shows—in that they are experienced for the sake of preaching His gospel, in which Jesus is present. Arthur Glasser, referring to this verse, makes the following point:

This points up a cardinal principle: the gospel cannot be preached and the people of God cannot be gathered into congregations within the nations (John 11:52) without individuals here and there “completing what is lacking in Christ’s affliction” in order to accomplish this task (Col. 1:24) . . . Such afflictions con-

front all who deliberately involve themselves in active service for Christ, especially when they seek to bear public witness to the gospel. They are “incomplete” in the sense that each successive generation of people of God must willingly embrace sufferings if the worldwide missionary task is to be completed. Only then will this privilege be forever ended.⁹⁷

Revelation 7:14 should also be referred to in this context, as we read of the martyrs who have come out of great tribulation standing before the throne of God, having also suffered the sufferings of Christ. They are the host of those who, in the tribulation of the last time, have been washed not in their own blood but in the blood of the Lamb. In their own suffering for Jesus Christ, they have borne witness to the sufferings which He Himself endured. But, as we shall see in our study of Revelation, the suffering of Christ in His Church is not an endless suffering. The time will come when the number of martyrs is complete and the suffering will end, as Christ returns to judge the earth.

In the meantime, Paul says, he will, in his flesh, fill out what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ (1:24) and labor with all the energy that God “powerfully works” within him (1:29). In the next chapter (2:12) Paul identifies that this “powerful working” is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. While Paul ministers in weakness, God provides the strength he needs to endure and to continue. The power that raised Christ from the dead is assured to those who fulfill Christ’s sufferings. Indeed it is to be doubted that one could do the one without the other.

Philemon

While the letter to Philemon contributes little new to our study that other letters do not develop in greater detail, for the sake of completeness it is important that we note what teachings are contained in this small epistle.

In verse 1, Paul opens his letter with the identification “a prisoner for Christ Jesus.” He adds no title of authority to his name, such as “apostle”⁹⁸ or “servant of Christ,”⁹⁹ as is his normal custom. The greeting in Philemon is unique to Paul’s writings.

By using this greeting, Paul emphasizes that he is not merely a prisoner or victim of religious intolerance. He is a prisoner of Jesus Christ. In verse 13 he says that he is a prisoner for the gospel. Eduard Lohse notes that this phrase shows that Paul “considers his imprisonment as the fate that is in store for the messenger of the gospel—this is, part and parcel of the commission given to him. The messenger of the Kyrios must suffer like his master to whom he owed obedience.”¹⁰⁰

It is obvious that this letter is to a dear friend, requesting a favor, and he has no intention of invoking his apostolic authority. He entreats his friend (verses 8,9)

rather than commanding him. Perhaps he is emphasizing the sacrifice that he has made for serving Christ and he is about to ask his friend to also make a sacrifice. Philemon is being asked to forgive his runaway slave and to treat Onesimus not as a slave but as a brother (verse 16). He waives his authority to command Philemon (verse 9) as an old man and “a prisoner for Christ Jesus.” He hopes that because of his age and his sacrifice that Philemon will be motivated to grant the request that he is about to make.¹⁰¹ Philemon must decide whether he will respond as a man of the world or as a servant of Christ. By referring to himself as a prisoner for Christ, Paul is reminding Philemon of the decisions that he has made. “Surely you can do likewise, dear friend.” Paul’s imprisonment is thus used to motivate Philemon to Christlike behavior.

Paul points out that it was specifically because of his imprisonment that Onesimus became a follower of Christ and Paul’s spiritual child (verse 10). He mentions that he would have liked to have kept Onesimus with him in his “imprisonment for the gospel” (verse 13). In such a situation, he needed help from others and, as an apostle, he could have claimed it. He did not, however, want to show disrespect for Philemon’s authority as the slave’s rightful owner (verse 14). Moreover, it is conceivable that Paul recognized that just as force is no attribute of God, neither is it to be an attribute of His people. Rather than resorting to a show of compulsion and strength, Paul uses the power of persuasion and love.

He is hopeful that Philemon will accept his plea on Onesimus’ behalf and accept his slave as a brother, just as he would receive Paul himself, were Paul able to be freed (verse 17). The apostle hopes to be freed, in answer to Philemon’s prayer (verse 22), but in the meantime, Onesimus will have to serve as proxy.

Paul seems quite confident that he would be released but he recognizes that whether that happens or not will depend solely on God’s decision.¹⁰² The wording of verse 22 makes it clear that Paul recognizes his release would not be for his sake, but for the sake of the community, as he describes himself as being “given to you.”¹⁰³

1 Timothy

The letters to Timothy are the last messages we have from Paul before he went to his own martyrdom, written to someone whom Paul obviously saw as his successor. In 1 Timothy, we find only one exhortation to Timothy that relates directly to our study:

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ

Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. (6:12–14)

In the face of opposition to the gospel of faith in Christ, the temptation is to 1) drop out of the battle, 2) change the message, or 3) live a lifestyle that would fit into society (thereby lessening the opposition). Paul instructs Timothy to resist these temptations and to hold firm to the good confession he made, at a point of his life, “*in the presence of many witnesses.*”

There is some debate about what Paul is referring to here. When did Timothy give such a confession? Most commentators suggest that this was at his baptism or ordination to ministry. The early church fathers from the second through fourth centuries, however, typically understood this to refer to a time when Timothy was on trial for his faith.¹⁰⁴ The parallel that Paul draws between Timothy’s confession before many witnesses (verse 12) and Jesus’ before Pontius Pilate (verse 13) lends credibility to this view, in my opinion.

He links Timothy’s confession and Jesus’ together with the reference to God “who gives life to all things” (1 Timothy 6:13). Ton notes:

Earlier, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians about his near-death experience in Asia, he told them that this had happened to him “in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9). When you know that God gives life to everything and even raises the dead, then you are able to confidently go into a ministry that you know might cost you your own life.¹⁰⁵

He echoes this idea in 2 Timothy 1:11,12:

I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me.

Paul appreciated the fact that Timothy had already withstood the test of being a confessor for Christ. He directs his attention to Jesus’ witness as an example of a confession similar to that which he had given at his time of testing to encourage Timothy to maintain this faithfulness in the days to come.

2 Timothy

The end of A.D. 62 and beginning of A.D. 63 marked a turning point in the relations between the Roman Empire and the Church of Jesus Christ as the Emperor Nero began to adopt a more theocratic and oriental form of government supremacy.¹⁰⁶ While not recognized as an official, legal religion, Christianity had at least been tol-

erated and even protected by the Roman authorities to this point.¹⁰⁷ Gradually, however, public opinion had turned against them and so had the government authorities. Already well known in imperial circles because of his first trial, Paul was arrested a second time on the accusation that he was promoting an unlawful religion (*superstitio illicita*). The time of the writing of 2 Timothy is likely just before the winter of A.D. 63, prior to the great fire that engulfed Rome in July of A.D. 64, when Christians were accused of setting the fire, arrested *en masse*, given a summary trial, and executed immediately.¹⁰⁸ Paul's case seems rather different, which argues for a date just prior to the large-scale persecution that would engulf the Church.¹⁰⁹

In this letter, Paul is in chains and awaiting a trial that he knows will go against him. Second Timothy is written by a man who is aware that he would certainly be martyred for Christ and His gospel in a relatively short time. He looks back on his life—one that Christ had promised would be filled with persecution and suffering (Acts 9:16)—and he has some thoughts to pass on to his protégé. It is obvious from the letter that Timothy is ministering in an area where opposition to the gospel has been and continues to be a reality (4:14,15). Paul also expects that this opposition will increase (3:1–9). As such, he wanted Timothy to know how to respond to this antagonism in a manner worthy of the gospel.

2 Timothy 1

First, Paul reminds Timothy, “*For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control*” (1:6,7). In the face of opposition, the temptation is to respond in fear, to withdraw or isolate oneself from a hostile world. This is not how Paul wants Timothy to respond. Instead of fear, Timothy is to respond to religious violence with God-given power, love, and self-control.

These three terms are closely related to each other:¹¹⁰

- a) **Power.** If the minister of God is to fulfill the difficult task to which he has been called, he will require divine strength not only to withstand the attacks of the world but to overcome it.¹¹¹ Donald Guthrie notes: “The power of the Holy Spirit within him has enabled many a naturally timid man to develop a boldness not his own when called in the name of God to fulfill a difficult ministry.”¹¹² In 1:8, this “power of God” is what will enable Timothy to join Paul in suffering for the gospel. Suffering for the gospel is never undertaken in our own strength. God's power is greater than any suffering.
- b) **Love.** First John 4:18 says, “*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in*

love.” Like power, love is a gift from God, offered to those who often do not deserve it and almost always with self-sacrifice. Pauletta Otis, commenting on this verse, notes:

It would be easier if the word “love” was exclusively a noun. It is not. It is also an active verb: “Love your neighbor as yourself” is an in-your-face concept. It is taking the love of God and applying it to otherwise fearful situations. God’s love is also non-discriminating. Loving your friends, allies, family, and people who agree with you is generally pretty easy. Loving people who do not agree with you, who look or act differently, or who threaten your life, is much more demanding. God did not say, “Please love people if you can, or if you want to, or when it’s convenient, or when you’ve had a good breakfast.” It was a “just do it” statement.

This is no soft, touchy-feely agenda. Love is hard. Yet specific actions are reasonably clear and simple The test of showing God’s love is not difficult to understand—it’s just hard to do.¹¹³

To seek the best for those who seek to harm you not only is appropriate because of divine instruction (Matthew 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36; Romans 12:20,21, etc.), but because of divine example (Romans 5:8; 1 John 3:16). By countering acts of hatred with acts of love, we respond in a manner worthy of the gospel for which we suffer.

- c) **Self-control.** There is some debate over the meaning of the third gift that Paul says God has given Timothy (σωφρονισμός). The precise meaning is difficult to determine as this is the word’s only appearance in the New Testament. The issue is whether Paul is using σωφρονισμός to mean “moderation, self-discipline or prudence”¹¹⁴ or “to have good or sound judgment, to be sensible, the ability to understand how to make good decisions.”¹¹⁵ In the face of opposition, all these qualities, wrought in the life of the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit, are clearly needed. In the face of antagonism and the difficulties of ministry—when there’s a temptation to allow fear to control—the ability to remain self-controlled in order to make good decisions is a gift of God, highly to be prized and essential to the faithful witness of the believer.

In 1:8, Paul introduces a second, though related, way in which Timothy is not to respond to opposition. Closely related to fear is shame. In 1:8, Paul admonishes Timothy not to be ashamed of the gospel for which he and Paul are suffering. He invites Timothy to join him in suffering: “*Therefore do not be ashamed of the testi-*

mony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share [or join me] in suffering for the gospel by the power of God” (1:8).

“Being ashamed” is a recurring theme in 2 Timothy 1. It appears in verses 8, 12, and 16. In verse 8, Paul tells Timothy “*not to be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord nor of him his prisoner.*”

Gordon Fee makes this observation:

Determining a precise meaning for the expression do not be ashamed poses some difficulties. The word frequently refers to “deserved” humiliation or disgrace, but more often it is “undeserved” humiliation and, especially for the biblical writers, humiliation from which one hopes for divine vindication (e.g., Ps. 25:1–3). At other times it relates to the stigma or embarrassment of association with that which has shame. In this passage these latter two meanings seem to coalesce. There is a stigma to being associated with a crucified Messiah (thus a state criminal) and his being a (political) prisoner. Yet it is “undeserved humiliation” from which there will be vindication “on that Day” (see v. 12). Thus, Paul does not want Timothy to avoid the humiliation generated by his association with Christ (*to testify about our Lord*, or perhaps to be understood more objectively, “of the witness [gospel] about our Lord”) or by his association with *me, his prisoner* (when imprisoned *for* Christ, Paul was not in his own thinking a prisoner of the empire, but of Christ himself).¹¹⁶

“Timothy,” Paul says in verse 8, “don’t be ashamed of me. Don’t abandon me out of fear, or shrink away from me because I might be a liability to you or because associating with Christ and me might endanger you.”

“Rather,” Paul continues, “join me! It is a privilege to suffer for Jesus! And we do not have to face this alone, but we are empowered by God Himself!” In verse 12, he writes, “*I am not ashamed because I am a prisoner for Christ.*”

To summarize Paul, “I know what I’m suffering for, and it’s not something to be ashamed of. There’s no personal embarrassment in it for me. I know that this was part of what it costs to be a messenger of the gospel that gives life to many and I know that God is going to finish and keep the work that I’ve started. My work will not end with my imprisonment or death.” Paul does not see his suffering as a tragedy or a setback. It is a direct result of his ministry to the Lord; it is an inevitability. The cause of the gospel, the cause of reaching a dying world with God’s salvation, demands sufferers.

The Persecuted Church, ultimately, is not a Church of victims! If faithful to Scripture, they go forth in the power of God, believing that suffering is not the worst thing that can happen to them.

It would appear that Onesiphorus had accepted this and in verse 16 we read that he “*was not ashamed of Paul’s chains.*” On the contrary, we read that he searched hard for Paul until he found him.

There were many prisoners in Rome, and to find a specific prisoner took a considerable amount of effort, endurance, expense, and risk.¹¹⁷ In doing so, though, he obeyed the Lord’s commandment in Matthew 25:35–40:

“*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”*

While it is praiseworthy to be involved in helping the poor, needy, and those in prisons for committing crimes, these are not the verses to support these kinds of ministries. The reference is to those of Christ’s “brothers” who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and in prison. The use of the word “brothers” in Matthew is restricted to biological family¹¹⁸ or to members of the household of faith.¹¹⁹ We are to do good to all men, but especially to those of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).

2 Timothy 2

It is in the second chapter that Paul fully develops his teaching about suffering for the gospel.

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for:

*If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;*

*if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.*
(2 Timothy 2:3–13)

In verses 3–6, Paul calls for Timothy to be single-minded in the carrying out of his ministry, even in the face of great suffering. He reminds Timothy that the reward for faithfulness does not come during the battle, the race, or the harvest, but at the end. We must be prepared to put off immediate gratification or expecting that this life will make sense apart from the perspective of eternity.

As we remember Jesus (verse 8), “*risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal,*” we still press on, knowing that the Word of God is not bound, even if we are. We are prepared to suffer in order that others might come to Christ and become part of God’s household, knowing that if we *die* with Him (or for Him), we will *live* with Him (verse 11). What an astonishing promise; if we have died in bringing life to others, we have died *with* Christ (emphasizing His solidarity with us) and thus will live *with* Him.¹²⁰ At the expense of our life, we bring life to others but when that happens, we actually receive life. This is a reminder that this life is not all that there is. The death of the martyr, though tragic, is not the end of the story; it is only the beginning of great glory and eternal life.

If we endure, Paul says in verse 12, we will reign with Christ; we will receive our inheritance, having demonstrated our ability to handle the tasks that He calls us to do. If, on the other hand, we deny Him, how can we expect Him to acknowledge us? As Jesus said in Matthew 10:33, “*whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.*” Second Timothy 2:12, thus, is a call for endurance.

In verse 13 the thought continues, “*If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.*” At first glance, this may seem to contradict what Paul has just said in verse 12 about God disowning those who disown Him. But the answer lies in seeing this as a contrast to the previous verse.

Even if we have periods of unfaithfulness to Christ, nevertheless He remains faithful to us so that we can turn back to Him and find that He has not changed His attitude to us.¹²¹ The possibility of denial of Christ is admitted, but it is emphasized that Christ continues to care for His disciples and is ready to welcome them back.¹²² His nature is such that He cannot be untrue to it. Thus, verse 12b warns the complacent, while verse 13 comforts the repentant.

2 Timothy 3:10–13

In the previous verses (2:14—3:9), Paul has been contrasting false teachers with true ones, and instructing Timothy on the characteristics that are needed in a day

when there is hostility against the gospel and increasing hostility on the horizon (3:1–9). He mentions those who opposed the truth in word and deed. In contrast, Timothy imitates Paul.

You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. (2 Timothy 3:10–11)

Paul sees his sufferings for Christ's sake as intrinsic to who he is as a man of God. His teachings, his goals, his faith, and his character are inseparable from his persecution and sufferings. In verse 11, Paul mentions Lystra, Timothy's hometown (Acts 16:1). Like he did earlier in the letter (1:3–5), Paul reminds Timothy of where he came from as a reminder of the kind of loyalty that they have to each other. It is as if Paul is saying, "You were there when I was nearly stoned to death in Lystra,¹²³ when I first met you and led you to Christ. You recall how my bringing the gospel to you meant that I had to suffer. And you've learned right from the beginning what it costs to be a minister of Christ. And now you are imitating that in your life and ministry."

But this is not unique to Timothy or Paul: "*all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*" (3:12). This is the lot of any who would imitate Paul. If one is not persecuted, one must seriously ask whether one is failing to meet the criteria of "living a godly life in Christ Jesus." Godliness in a hostile world will always be resisted.

At the same time, Paul says in verse 13, the false teachers will get worse and worse and thereby avoid persecution. As we saw in both in Galatians 6:12 and 2 Corinthians 11, it is the mark of a false teacher to deliberately refashion his message and way of life to avoid having to pay the cost of following Christ.

The only purpose for Paul's own suffering is to carry the gift of salvation to people everywhere. Ton rightfully states:

Suffering has no value in itself, and one should not seek suffering for its own sake. Suffering has value only if it comes as a consequence of the fact that one has embraced the cause of Christ and has invested all that one has and all that one is in the service of the delivery of the gospel. These are the sufferings of Christ and it is only in the cause of the gospel that one becomes a partner with Christ in His suffering.¹²⁴

2 Timothy 4:6–18

Paul closes his letter to Timothy by referring to his death:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6–8)

The phrase “*I am already being poured out as a drink offering*” is rich imagery. It is reference to the Old Testament sacrificial system where wine was poured in the altar (Numbers 15:5,7,10; 28:7) presented daily (Exodus 29:40), on the Sabbath (Numbers 28:9), and on feast-days (28:14). In Numbers 6:16,17, we see the drink offering as part of the peace and grain offerings which were voluntary acts of worship, expressing one’s gratitude to God for His goodness and for the fellowship that the worshipper enjoyed with God after having dealt with sin through the sin offering or trespass offering and committing himself completely to God through the burnt offering.

In the Jewish worship prior to the destruction of the temple, the worshipper would lay his hand on the sacrificial lamb he had brought to the tabernacle or temple, confessing his sins. He would witness the lamb slain, and the blood sprinkled over and around the altar. Then he would see the animal skinned and its body cut in pieces, placed on the altar and consumed in the fire of God’s wrath. In response to this atoning sacrifice, by which he was assured of his acceptance with the Lord (Leviticus 1), he then would offer a grain offering (Leviticus 2) as symbolic of his whole devotion to the reconciled God who had atoned for his sins. Then, in the drink offering he would lift up a cup of wine and pour it out over the ashes of the lamb and the grain, to express his hearty concurrence with all that he had seen and offered, as he witnessed, by faith, what had transacted between the Lord and him—his heart poured out in gratitude to God’s glory of all mercy, love, and forgiveness.

It is this joyous sense that we find in Paul as he finishes his life (and in Philipians 2:17,18). God has used him to proclaim the message of reconciliation between God and man, made possible by the sacrificial death of His Son. He has lived out his life as an act of sacrifice before God of commitment in response to that sacrificial death and now, at the end of his life, Paul sees his martyrdom as the drink offering being poured out as a final act of worship. Then, like the worshipper at the tabernacle/temple, he would depart. His service of worship will have concluded well.

To come to the end of your life knowing that you have accomplished the task that God had called you to do is what all of God’s servants should strive toward. To

know that you have lived your life as a sacrifice to God, giving life to others in the process—surely this is the kind of life that will receive the rewards of heaven. What a contrast to the all-too-common sentiment expressed by many at the end of their lives: “If only I had had more time. If only I had done more for God. If only my life could have counted for more. If only I could live my life again, I would do it differently. If only . . .”

This is not Paul’s sentiment, however, as he switches metaphors in verse 7 to that of a fight and a race. He says that he has fought a good fight and finished the race. He is now ready to receive his reward.

Sadly, not all run the race or finish the fight. There are some that have dropped out, as the going became difficult.

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! (2 Timothy 4:9–16)

During Paul’s time of need at his first trial before Nero, he found that most of his colleagues did not respond as he had instructed Timothy to in chapter 1. Demas deserted him. For reasons that he does not explain, Crescens and Titus left for Galatia and Dalmatia. Did they abandon him as well? We cannot say with certainty. While Paul does not criticize or condemn their actions, it is hard to see these actions in a positive light, given the context.

But Paul did not face the Roman emperor alone. As Christ promised (Matthew 10:8–20; Mark 13:11; Luke 21:12–15), the Lord was with him as he stood to give testimony for his faith:

But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:17,18)

Based on the success of his prior trial, Paul was assured of God’s presence at his time of need. He was convinced that God would not abandon him and while he knew

God would not deliver him this time, he was assured that he would be kept from dishonoring Him (“*every evil deed*”) and brought safely to the end of his journey.

Additionally, lest we begin to think that Paul somehow deserves the accolades and praise for his ministry to the Lord, he is careful to point out that all that he has accomplished is done *by* the Lord. It is *His* work, and to *Him* alone belongs all the glory.

Here in 2 Timothy 4, Paul has arrived at the end of his journey of faith, and he has “kept the faith”; that is, he has remained in that position of total dependence on Christ alone for his acceptance into God’s eternal kingdom. At this moment, Paul is completely confident of the reception with which he will be welcomed in heaven.

But what did he mean by “*the crown of righteousness*” in verse 8? Paul certainly did not work for that righteousness; it was all the work of Christ for him. Then why will Paul be given a crown for something that has been entirely the work of someone else? In fact, this is the whole point of the matter: Paul will receive the crown because of his total reliance on the finished work of Christ on the cross for him.¹²⁵ As he looks ahead to his “homecoming” he knows that it is God who has delivered him and will bring him safely to his destination (4:17,18). Therefore to Him goes all of the glory (4:19).

HEBREWS

The key verse of the entire book of Hebrews is perhaps Hebrews 12:25:

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.

The central theme of Hebrews is the importance of listening to the voice of God in Scripture and in the act of Christian preaching.¹²⁶ The book of Hebrews is a sermon written to a group of Jewish Christians who had endured various forms of reproach for their faith—social rejection, isolation, and humiliation. The sermon begins with the reminder of how God has spoken in times past and now has spoken to us through His Son (1:1,2). He concludes by appealing to the readers to bear with his “word of exhortation” that he has written to them in this letter (13:22). The only other place in Scripture where this phrase appears is in Acts 13:15 where it refers to a sermon in a synagogue service following the reading from the Law and the Prophets.¹²⁷

At some point earlier in the history of this group of believers, some of them had experienced the plundering of their property, and when some had been impris-

oned, those who had retained their freedom had not been ashamed to show their solidarity with their brethren in chains (10:32–34). Apparently, some of their leaders had been killed as well in times past (13:7,8), though presently martyrdom was not their common experience (12:4). This was not because the persecution had lessened, but because they had begun to refuse the cross. Franz Delitzsch notes:

It is indeed implied (ch. xiii. 7) that departed members of their church had suffered martyrdom in days gone by; but those still living here appeared to, though not without experience of persecution in their own case, in the time of their first love, have secured themselves against its utmost violence by a sinful conformity to the faithless world around them, and are living in a condition dangerously near to that of apostacy. They are refusing or fleeing from the cross and seem quite to have forgotten that the afflictions that God sends to His people are a discipline of love.¹²⁸

Probably most of the resistance these believers faced came from the synagogues and their family members. Perhaps resistance also came from Gentile authorities who oppressed them because Christianity was no longer seen to be a Jewish sect and thus not under its protection. Some of their numbers had either remained in prison from a previous crackdown or a new wave of arrests had begun (13:3). In the face of such difficulties, these Jewish-background believers had begun to struggle with the cost of discipleship and reconsider their decision to become followers of Jesus. They considered returning to their Jewish religious beliefs.

The author of Hebrews, therefore, writes this sermon to be read during their meetings, to confirm these believers in their faith and to warn them against taking this course of action. The writer urges his readers to consider those who have demonstrated faithfulness to God in the past (chapter 11), to consider the example of Jesus and to fix their eyes on Him, who “*endured the cross, scorning its shame*” so that they will not “*grow weary and lose heart*” (12:2,3, NIV).

He reminds them that what Jesus accomplished on the cross cannot be repeated; there is only one gospel and if you are not prepared to suffer for it, but return to your old religion, you cut yourself off from the only way to God.

We must take very seriously the warnings in Hebrews not to apostatize. The author is not setting up straw men to knock down, warning of dangers that could never happen. His arguments and warnings go straight to the central exclusive truth of Christianity—that there is one way to God. Those contemplating returning to Judaism are considering removing themselves from God’s only provision for salvation.

Yet, there is both warning and comfort given in this book—warning about the dangers of abandoning one’s faith in Christ and comfort that God is faithful. There

is the encouraging reminder that Jesus went through every trial and temptation they face and is therefore able to help them in the midst of theirs (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15).

Hebrews 11

In Hebrews 11, the author makes reference to various well-known figures in history who faced times when their faith was tested. Though the future was uncertain for many of them, they continued to trust God. The example of Abraham and Sarah, for example, in verses 8–18 illustrates the character of committed faith as being “openness to the future which expresses itself now through obedient trust in God who has spoken through a word of promise.”¹²⁹ Perhaps one could also state it more popularly, faith is the steadfast assurance that God can do and will do what He said He would do and acting accordingly.

This faith is guaranteed only in the promise of God and expresses itself in a realization that this world is not the fulfillment of God’s plan. The patriarchs look for a home of their own, but never receive it in their lifetime. This is a witness, the author says, of the reality that the final destination of the people of faith is a country and city that God has prepared (11:13–16). This is meant to provide hope for those suffering for their commitment to Jesus Christ, a realization that the fulfillment of God’s promises is not limited to this life only.

But in this life, faith will not be easy. When asked by their tormentors, “Where is your God?” these men and women of committed faith answered, “I will put my trust in the Lord.”¹³⁰ Some were delivered (11:33–35a); others were not (11:35b–38). In verse 35, we see the transition of thought in the writer’s emphasis as he contrasts the resurrection of the children of faithful mothers and the resurrection of those who were tortured and killed for their faithfulness. The great joy and rewards in this life that mothers experienced who received their children back in the way of resurrection (εξ ἀναστάσεως) are inferior, the author says, to the joy and eternal rewards experienced by those who were tortured and killed rather than renounce their faith in Christ. Theirs is a “*better resurrection*” (κρείττονη ἀνάστασις).¹³¹

Which is harder for God: to raise someone from the dead or to bring someone through unremitting persecution and at the end, the person is continuing to love and trust Him? Which is more a demonstration of His grace and power? Which is the greater miracle? Is it any wonder that this is referred to as a “better” resurrection, as believers experience the grace of God in a way that leads to joy and rewards that they would not have experienced had God simply delivered them from their troubles?

On the other hand, for those who apostate, the resurrection will not be a time of reward or joy. As Leon Morris notes, “It is better to endure suffering and even torture now in order that the resurrection may be joyous.”¹³² The encouragement

to the readers is to gain an eternal perspective and to realize that this life is not all that there is.

In the verses following 11:35, the author draws the reader's attention to other examples of those who suffered and sacrificed rather than renounce their faith, saying that the world is not worthy of such (verse 38). Whether they were delivered or not, however, all of them received God's commendation for their committed, persevering faith (11:39). Yet, the author says, they did not receive what was promised to them. Hebrews 11:6 points out that those who draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him. Verse 39 (as well as 11:13) points out, however, that the reward may not come in this life. The reason given for this is that "*God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect*" (11:40).

Remembering that this sermon was given to Jewish-background believers who were considering returning to their former religion helps us to understand the cryptic wording of 11:40. The examples of faith given in chapter 11 are all from a time prior to Christ's coming. These are examples that the readers would have been familiar with from childhood. The author, prior to this chapter, had argued that the sacrifice of Christ was the only way to finally achieve the purposes of God of reconciling mankind to Himself. There is no other way. Everything prior to that had merely pointed toward what Christ had fulfilled. Now, because of Christ's death and resurrection, He opens the way into the very presence of God. Without "us" (those who have witnessed the new life in Christ), the Old Testament believers would never have experienced the fullness of God's promise. To abandon this and to return to Judaism would entail cutting oneself off from the possibility of enjoying the fulfillment of God's promise. The "better" plan that God has made embraces a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22), better promises (8:6), better sacrifices (9:23), better possessions (10:34), and a better resurrection (11:35). All of these are now available to all of God's people but experienced only if one is part of the whole of God's people.¹³³ One cannot experience these things by going backward and returning to that which was only temporary and preparatory.

Chapter 11 was carefully crafted to encourage those who were wavering in their faith, by using examples of trusting, committed faith that they were familiar with and to urge them to press on, knowing that the promised reward was just ahead.

Hebrews 12

In Hebrews 12:1, the author turns to the readers and says, "If these people could remain faithful to God (and they didn't enjoy all the blessings that you do), so can you."

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. (Hebrews 12:1–3)

As noted earlier, verse 4 points out that the readers had not yet resisted to the point of death, as Jesus had. Lane suggests the phrase “*you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood*” could be understood figuratively as “You still have not done your best.”¹³⁴ He believes, however, that it is better to interpret the phrase as a statement of fact in reference to bloody persecution, indicating that the readers had not yet experienced the reality of martyrdom in their midst.¹³⁵ The observation of 12:4 is, thus, intended to shame the readers into realizing that their suffering is insignificant in comparison with that suffered by Jesus. Yet they are considering dropping out, and abandoning their faith in Him.

My own preference is to take both of these meanings together, in the way that Delitzsch does.¹³⁶ Thus understood, 12:4 would be observing that the readers have not experienced martyrdom because they have not done their best in identifying themselves with Him. Not only that, the author continues in 12:5, but they had forgotten that suffering can be an instrument of loving discipline in the hand of God.

As noted earlier in our study of the Old Testament, many people confuse discipline and punishment.¹³⁷ As you may recall in our study of Deuteronomy 8, the suffering of the Israelites in the wilderness is referred to as “discipline” to discover what was in the heart of the people (8:2). By this they were to learn that man does not live by bread alone but by everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord (8:3). In this, they were to know that God was disciplining them as a father disciplines his son (8:5).

The author of Hebrews obviously has this in mind in chapter 12. Persecution, suffering for Christ’s sake, is seen as the Father’s way of confirming that we are worthy for the kingdom, able to take on the responsibilities that our Father has in store for us. Through it, He develops in us the “peaceful fruit of righteousness” (12:10).¹³⁸

In 2:10, the author discussed the sufferings of the Author of our Faith and that God considered it “fitting” that His Son should suffer. The Father considered suffering to be the appropriate method by which He would perfect His only begotten Son.

That, of course, raises the question, “How can it be said that Jesus, being God, needed ‘perfecting?’” The answer lies in the religious imagery used in the early parts

of Hebrews, with “perfecting” being understood in the sense of being “consecrated or prepared for a specific task.” Through suffering, Jesus was fully equipped for His office as our High Priest before God; His suffering until death was necessary for Him to accomplish His redemptive mission. This methodology was consistent with God’s character as the means by which He would bring about the reconciliation of man to Himself. Sacrifice and suffering are consistently God’s means of accomplishing His purposes.

Jesus’ suffering also prepared Him to fully sympathize with His people in their afflictions (2:17,18). His death delivers us from the fear of death to which we were enslaved (2:15). Ton states: “When the martyrs meet their death without fear, Satan’s last instrument is rendered powerless, and he is crushed and defeated.”¹³⁹

In 5:8,9, we read that Jesus learned obedience through suffering. Lane points out that in Hebrews *pascein* (suffering) ordinarily refers to the suffering of Jesus as His passion (2:9,10; 9:26; 13:12) and takes on the nuance of “to die.”¹⁴⁰ Jesus demonstrated a willingness to obey the Father even to the point of suffering and dying, even though it was something that He did not want to do in His flesh (5:7).¹⁴¹ Still He obeyed and thus accomplished the purposes of God, having been made “perfect” (5:9). It is this same sort of obedient character that God wants to create in His adopted children.

For this reason, suffering, persecution, and martyrdom are not the fated tragedies of a miserable earthly existence; they are clear indications that one is in God’s “school,” in the place where God is forming His child into His own image of holiness and righteousness (12:10).¹⁴² This is how God prepared His own Son for His ministry; it is how He prepares us for ours. This is God’s “fitting” or appropriate method (2:10).

We should not be surprised at this teaching. It was given by Jesus Himself when He taught His disciples to be perfect just as their Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Significantly, Jesus gave this command in the context of His instructions to those who suffer persecution: “*Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*” (Matthew 5:44,45).

It would seem that only in such an environment of resistance and suffering can a godly character be fully developed.¹⁴³ To the Hebrew-background believers reading this book, the call was to look past the prospect of suffering and to look to the results. Persecution, rather than being seen as a threat to faith, should be viewed as a testing ground where faith is matured.

Hebrews 13

While the solidarity between Christ and those who are persecuted has been well established in this study, Hebrews 13:3 also demonstrates that there is to be a solidarity between members of the body of Christ to the degree that those who are imprisoned and suffer for His sake can be assured that those who are not presently undergoing such trials will care enough for them to feel their chains and pain. This parallels the author's observation in 10:32–34 that a sign of their first love was endurance in the face of persecution, recognizing the temporal nature of one's earthly possessions and a readiness to be partners with those who were suffering, having compassion on those in prison.¹⁴⁴

As noted earlier, in 13:7 the author calls the readers of this sermon to remember leaders who had once taught the Word of God to them.¹⁴⁵ These leaders are no longer speaking. Their words have been silenced. Their preaching belongs to a time in the Church's past that is no more.

It would seem to me—and a number of commentators¹⁴⁶—that this verse is speaking of those whose faith resulted in their martyrdom. To strengthen their wavering faith, the writer urges these believers to continually consider (look at again and again) the “outcome of their faith” and commands them to imitate their faith.¹⁴⁷ The testimony and example of those who have successfully faced and overcome persecution should provide inspiration and hope to those who are wavering, as it reminds them of the constancy of God. The author emphasizes this in the following verse when he reminds them that “*Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever*” (13:8). With that in mind, they should not be led away by teachings that are inconsistent with the teachings that they received from these former leaders who were prepared to die for what they believed in rather than recant.

In 13:12,13, we find a final reference to Jesus' sufferings that are depicted as both redemptive and paradigmatic.¹⁴⁸ In verse 11, the writer reminds them that in the Jewish sacrificial system, the bodies of the animals that were offered for sacrifice were taken outside of the camp to be burned, symbolizing their sinfulness and shameful condition. In the same way, Jesus died as our sacrifice outside of the camp. He became sin for us, a symbol of reproach and disgrace. The readers are urged to go and join Jesus “*outside of the camp and bear the reproach he endured.*” Just as Jesus was abused, humiliated, and rejected, the readers are urged to identify themselves with Jesus' sufferings. They are called to accept the social ostracism and other shameful consequences that come from identifying with Jesus. In Hebrews 13:13, the writer adapts, for his own purposes, the familiar call of Jesus to take up the cross and follow Him.¹⁴⁹ This is a hard call for these Jewish believers. It may seem safer within the camp but the writer reminds them that the “safe” place is not

where they belong. Their place is outside the camp with Jesus. As Revelation 14:4 depicts, the faithful of God are those who follow the Lamb wherever He goes.

JAMES

In 1:2–18, James refers to the “various trials” (peirasmoi~ peripeshte) that believers meet. The word for “trials” used here (peirasmoi~) has a range of meaning in the New Testament. It can mean an inner enticement to sin (1 Timothy 6:9), to put something or someone to a test by asking questions (Matthew 16:1), to lay a trap, (Luke 10:25), adverse external circumstances, or persecution for one’s faith (1 Peter 4:12).¹⁵⁰ As Moo points out, the use of the modifying word “various” (peripeshte) should lead us to believe that James is referring both to the difficulties that all people face (e.g., illness—5:14; financial reverses—1:9), as well as social and economic persecution (cf. 2:6) that Christians uniquely face because of their faith.¹⁵¹

The following principles from this passage are relevant to our study:

1. God uses trials to produce steadfastness and spiritual maturity (1:2–4).
2. The one going through such trials should therefore consider it all joy (1:2).
3. The righteous man undergoing trials should pray for wisdom—the ability to see things from God’s perspective—and live accordingly (1:5). The believers can be assured that God will certainly answer this prayer because:
 - a. God is good to all who call on Him.
 - b. God gives with an open hand and without reservation.
 - c. God’s giving will never demean the one who asks by making him feel that God is disapproving and reluctant to give what is for our good.
4. The man undergoing persecution can have confidence that God’s goodness is reliable. The call is to trust in Him, and to turn away from the confusion that comes with trusting in one’s own resources or wondering if God can be counted on (1:6–8).

James 1:9–12 introduces a theme that will be developed further in James 2, namely the tension between the rich and the poor. In 2:6,7, James alludes to the fact that it is the rich who are “oppressing” the readers of this epistle. The rich drag them into court and blaspheme the honorable name by which they are called. James shares Paul’s presupposition that most of the Christians to whom he is writing are

poor.¹⁵² But James's letter is not so much a condemnation of the rich but of their actions of oppression. In the book of Acts, persecution is often instigated by the rich who feel their source of income threatened by the spread of Christianity.¹⁵³ Their place of influence and their access to resources enable them to privately oppress the believers and instigate legal proceedings against them (2:6).

It is from this context that James is astonished to learn that his readers are actually showing preference to the rich (2:1–5). This is not only divisive, dishonorable, and contrary to the law of love (2:4,6,8–13), but lacking in common sense. These rich people to whom the readers are so eager to show preference, not only oppress and litigate against them, they also “*blaspheme the honorable name by which [they] were called*” (2:7). The phrase translated as “honorable name” in the English Standard Version is noteworthy. James uses this same phrase in Acts 15:17 as he quotes the prophet Amos. This idiom is frequently found in the Old Testament and refers to the close relationship between Yahweh and His people.¹⁵⁴ In the life of the Church, Jesus now occupies this role and so it is understandable why James is staggered by the actions of his readers. Moo observes: “How incongruous that those who blaspheme that ‘honorable name’ should be accorded preferential treatment in the church!”¹⁵⁵

In 1:9–11 James wants the believers to rejoice because of who they are in Christ rather than envying their oppressors. Those believers who are rich are, on the other hand, to boast in their “humiliation” (1:10). By associating with a despised minority, they will suffer the ridicule that they may have once heaped on the followers of Christ. The rich Christian will be deprived of much that he once cherished in terms of social and business contacts, and may be cut off from business opportunities that he would have access to, had he not been a believer.¹⁵⁶ Perhaps he will experience the actual persecution and destruction of his property and be reminded just how temporary earthly possessions really are. This is a valuable lesson to learn. Hence, the reason for boasting.

In 1:12, the apostle reminds all believers, rich or poor, of the reward that awaits those who remain steadfast under trial and do not deny their faith. They will receive the “crown of life.” It is given by God to those who love Him and have demonstrated that love by faithfulness.

In 1:13–18, James answers objections from some who fail to remain faithful under trials. They argue that they could not help but fail because the trial had come from God Himself. James points out that they are mistaken. The reason one falls is not because of the outward trial but because of the inward temptation. Additionally, while God may allow our faith to be tried to show that it is genuine, He does not tempt us to disobey Him. We disobey because we are tempted, lured away by our

own lusts, and when the bait becomes the focus, the only reality in our life, rather than God, we are ensnared and sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes this process:

At this moment God is quite unreal to us, he loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real . . . Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God. And now his falsehood is added to this proof of strength. The lust thus aroused envelops the mind and will of man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us . . . It is here that everything within me rises up against the Word of God.¹⁵⁷

So do not be deceived, James says (1:16). God has consistently desired only that which is ultimately good for us (1:16,17) to the end that we might be a kind of first-fruits of His creation (1:18)—His special property and evidence of His renewing of mankind to His image. Rick Warren makes the obvious but often forgotten observation that many Christians are frightened and demoralized by tempting thoughts, feeling guilty that they are not “beyond” temptation, ashamed just for being tempted. “You will never outgrow temptation,” Warren reminds us.¹⁵⁸ “In one sense you can consider temptation a compliment. Satan does not tempt those who are already doing his will. Temptation is a sign that Satan hates you, not a sign of weakness or worldliness.”¹⁵⁹

PETER

1 Peter

First Peter is a book specifically written to encourage Christians in what is now modern-day Turkey who were undergoing defamation and persecution from the community in which they lived. Peter’s purpose is to instruct the believers there to stand firm in their faith in the midst of a society that not only resented the message of Christianity, but, increasingly, even the very presence of Christians.

Written in approximately A.D. 63–64, Peter’s letter reflects the fact that the Church was standing on a precipice. Christians were being slandered on every side (2:12,15; 3:16) and Peter could see that there was coming an explosion of violence against them (4:12). While the Church had, up to this point, enjoyed a measure of toleration and even protection from the Roman authorities,¹⁶⁰ this was about to change. Peter warns his readers not to be surprised by the “fiery trial” that is about to engulf them and urges them to be prepared to stand in the face of it. In 4:15,16, he writes, “*But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.*”

Referring to the context in which Peter wrote these words, Marta Sordi notes:

Tacitus says the Christians were hated for their crimes (“flagitia”) and Suetonius speaks of “superstitio malefica.” Peter uses the same words when writing of the slanders used against the Christians: “they speak ill of you as workers of evil deeds” (I Peter 2:12). We know what these “evil deeds” were from the writers of the second century. The most important were infanticide (the pagan interpretation of the Eucharist) and incest (the pagan interpretation of the Christians’ custom of calling each other Brother and Sister). Beyond these atrocious and fanciful accusations was the more general, all-embracing one of being “haters of mankind,” an accusation which had in the past also been levelled at the Jews (“*adversus omnes alios hostile odium*” (*Tac. Histories*, v. 5.1)). It is interesting to note that, during Nero’s reign, this charge is also brought against the Stoics of the ruling classes.¹⁶¹

Like the Stoics, Christians preached and practiced a life of morality and religious austerity that Roman society found very hard to tolerate.¹⁶² In particular, Peter notes, society had come to take offense at the fact that the converts to Christianity no longer participated in many of the cultural practices that were considered the norm. These Christians stood out as odd and contrary to the culture in which they lived. Their critics perhaps saw them as being societal misfits, a little esoteric and peculiar, and hence challenged their honor and publicly ridiculed them.¹⁶³ Peter intends to encourage his readers to respond honorably to this attempt to shame them before society.¹⁶⁴

There is a sense in which this perception that Christians are anti-social is not entirely inaccurate nor completely unavoidable. Christians, whenever they have been obedient to the teachings of Jesus, have tended to be viewed by society with, if not hostility, at least a degree of disbelief. To borrow a phrase that was more popular in the 1970s, Christianity tends to be, by its very nature, countercultural.

This was certainly true in the day in which Peter’s readers lived. In the first century, the seeds of what would eventually be known as Gnosticism were already being sown into the minds of the general populace. The separation of the body and the spirit was foundational to this belief system. The body was seen as only transitional, a husk to be discarded and which had little or no influence on the spirit. Many concluded that since only the spirit was really important, one could pretty much do whatever one wanted with the body. The spirit and the body were so separate that what one did with the body would not influence one’s relationship with God or the gods. Thus, Christianity’s insistence on moral and sexual purity was met with stares of disbelief in much of the early Greek and Roman culture. What did purity have to do with religion?

In Greek and Roman culture, religious festivals and social gatherings were often characterized by heavy drinking and sexual depravity of virtually every sort. To refuse to participate was seen as being odd at the very least. Most would have likely considered it an expression of religious rejection and the Christians as being rather judgmental.

So, when Peter writes in 4:4, *“They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you,”* we are struck with the realization that those who came to faith in Christ in this society were suddenly called upon to stand in direct opposition to the surrounding society, facing accusations of being an antisocial malcontent. “What is wrong with you people?” would have not been an uncommon question.

But it became more than just that. The disbelief soon turned to social rejection, insults, perhaps even mob actions and acts of vandalism and violence. Peter knows that these believers to whom he is writing are tempted not to respond as Jesus would. When rocks are thrown, they want to throw them back and when insults fly, they are tempted to reply with an equally colorful metaphor.

With this in mind, and knowing that even more difficult days were on the horizon, Peter urges his readers to consider the example of Jesus and to persevere. To understand Peter’s instructions, it is helpful to start at the end of the book where his purpose for writing is succinctly stated.

1 Peter 5:12

In 1 Peter 5:12, the apostle says, *“By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.”*

In other words, “I have written you this brief letter to explain to you what the true grace of God is. Now stand in it.” This verse explains why Peter wrote this book to these persecuted brothers and sisters—to help them understand the true grace of God, which, if they stood in it, would enable them to overcome, to remain faithful in the face of societal rejection and increasing hostility. But what is this “*true grace of God*” to which Peter is referring?

1 Peter 2:19–23

Grace is a predominant theme in Peter’s first epistle. The key passage is found in 1 Peter 2:19,20:

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you

endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.

The two occurrences of the phrase “this is a gracious thing” (or “this is commendable”) in verses 19 and 20 are identical (tou'to cari~). The literal translation of tou'to cari~ is “this is grace.” In verse 19, the phrase stands by itself, whereas in verse 20 it is expanded to tou'to cari~ paraí qew' or “This is grace *toward God*.” A literal translation of the latter part of verse 20 would read, “This is grace in God's eyes—when you suffer for doing what is right and endure.” In other words, Peter defines grace as suffering due to one's faithfulness to God and enduring.

Seeing grace in this light is not entirely unique in the New Testament. Paul, in Philippians 1:19, spoke of the believers there not only receiving the grace of God of believing in Christ, but also receiving the grace of suffering for Him. In 2 Corinthians, the apostle spoke of receiving the grace of becoming poor in order to enrich others (2 Corinthians 8:1–9).

First Peter 2:19,20 is in many ways the keystone to understanding Peter's theology of persecution and suffering for Christ's sake. It is noteworthy that the language Peter uses here is typical of when he is trying to draw a comparison between how the world views something and how God views it. He uses the identical phrase paraí qew' (“toward God”) in 2:4 where he states that, from the world's perspective, Christ was rejected, but from God's perspective (paraí qew'), He was chosen and precious.

If we were to translate 2:19 in a way that would be linguistically consistent with 2:4, we would read, “From the viewpoint of the world, suffering unjustly and enduring it is considered a tragedy, but from God's perspective, it is grace.”¹⁶⁵ We might also be justified in saying that from the world's perspective those who endure persecution are heroic, but from God's perspective they are recipients of grace.

Enduring suffering, Peter says, is evidence that God is at work in one's life. There is no glory for the sufferer. No hero worship. No merit for those who are able to endure hardship, no boasting of one's achievements. It is evidence of God's grace. It is all a work of God, from beginning to end. When people can suffer horrible persecution and endure, it is evidence that God has been at work.

Ton notes:

Whenever we find Peter writing about suffering, about its purpose and its achievements, we have to keep in mind that it is all a work of grace, and that God is at work through it. Consequently, there is no merit for the one who endures hardship and suffering, and there can be no boasting of its achievements.¹⁶⁶

After I speak on the persecution of Christians around the world, people often come up to me afterwards and say things like, “I'm not sure that I could go through

persecution and suffer for my faith.” The wonderful truth is that you do not have to be strong enough, as if it depends upon your own strength or courage. However, there is a catch: you are likely to respond to persecution in a manner consistent with how you are already living your Christian life. Believers who are walking in faith and responding to God’s grace now can be assured of God’s presence and grace if and when they are called upon to suffer for Christ’s sake.

In Luke 21:10–15, Jesus said:

“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”

Jesus’ promise provides assurance of His presence in the midst of persecution. The parallel passages in Matthew 10:18–20 and Mark 13:9–11 promise the presence of the Holy Spirit. The meaning is the same. The call is not to be anxious when the believer finds himself in such a position. He is to relax and to realize that God will give him the grace he needs to endure and faithfully maintain his testimony before his persecutors at the moment he needs it and not one minute before!

The question we should ask ourselves at this point is, “How is my walk with Christ right now?” The early church father Tertullian once made the observation,

*I know not whether the wrist that has been wont to be surrounded with the palmleaf-like bracelet will endure till it grows into the numb hardness of its own chain! I know not whether the leg that has rejoiced in the anklet will suffer itself to be squeezed into the gyve [shackle]! I fear the neck, beset with pearl and emerald nooses, will give no room to the broadsword!*¹⁶⁷

Tertullian’s point was that we, as believers, need to live in fellowship with Christ *now*. We are called to stand on His grace in obedience and trust, living sacrificially for the sake of Christ and His kingdom *now*. To the end that should we be called to the privilege of suffering for His sake, we will be found to have learned obedience already. In the words of Tertullian, “Let us stand ready to endure every violence, having nothing which we may fear to leave behind. It is these things which are the bonds which retard our hope.”¹⁶⁸

In Hebrews 5:7,8 we read that Jesus was prepared for the cross by learning obedience to the will of the Father while He was in the Garden, when he faced the decision of whether or not He would follow the Father's will.

Every day, we face decisions about whether we will stand in the grace of God. We learn obedience by saying, "Yes, Lord." And in doing so, we are developing the pattern that we would follow if called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice.

The Lord warned the prophet Jeremiah, "*If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?*" (Jeremiah 12:5, NIV). If we are not prepared to embrace the sacrifices that come with following Jesus in life, it is doubtful that we will follow Him in death. If we do not lean on God to face the stresses of everyday life today, how can we expect to deal with those that come should we follow Him in a situation that takes us out of the ordinary, into an unfamiliar and hostile environment? If we are not leaning on God's grace in our daily lives now, what makes us think that we will do so when the time of testing comes?

Perseverance is a process, built upon training, built upon a practice of saying "Yes" to God in all aspects of life, calling upon the resources that God has given to us to stand. Is this to say that some do not deny Christ under persecution? Yes, some do, but it is not because God did not provide the grace necessary to stand. He has given us everything we need for life and godliness, as Peter writes in 2 Peter 1:3.

Our calling is to stand within the grace that He has provided, following the example of our Lord, as 1 Peter 2:21–23 says: "*For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges rightly.*"

This is echoed in 4:19 when Peter says, "*Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*" We entrust ourselves to our Creator who is always faithful, as we practice doing what is right.

Li DeXian

During 2000–2001, Chinese house church leader Li DeXian frequently faced arrest due to his activities with the underground church near Huadu in Guangdong province. During this time, as he would go to a church, he would pack a bag with a blanket and a spare change of clothes. Every time he went to church, he went expecting to be arrested.

Pastor Li had been arrested many times. Twice, police beat him to the point that he vomited blood. One time Li's face was beaten with his own Bible. He has been forced to work in factories where they build Christmas lights for export to Canada and the U.S., laboring in poorly lit conditions, without pay, and beaten if he did not meet the quota.

But he continues to minister to this present day to the various congregations that he is responsible for, knowing that he could be sent to labor camps for up to three years without a formal trial.

The risks are great, but Li's bag is packed. More than having a bag packed, though, his mind and heart are prepared. He has lived by God's grace and he is prepared to die by that same grace. He is willing to pay any cost to preach the gospel. He is convinced God will care for him—even in prison—and keep him true to Him.

1 Peter 3:8–17

In 3:8–17, Peter picks up the theme of following Jesus' example that he introduced in 2:21. Our calling (3:9; cf. 2:21), Peter says, is to live peaceably in a hostile society as Christ did, not returning insult for insult or blow for blow (3:10–12). If we are to suffer, it should be for doing what is right (3:13) and we may expect to be blessed for doing so (3:14a).

Peter's call not to fear our persecutors in verses 14,15 is based on the words of Isaiah 8:12b,13: "*Do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy.*"¹⁶⁹

The Lord admonishes the prophet to tell the godly in Israel not to fear the impending invasion of the brutal Assyrian army as those who do not follow God do. In the face of enemy danger, the response of the godly in both Isaiah and 1 Peter should not be one of fear but of reverence. "When believers fear the threat of those who would abuse them and become disturbed or troubled (3:14b), they allow these bad people lordship over their lives, *de facto* accepting them as the persons determining their lifestyle and attitude towards life."¹⁷⁰

The "fear" that the Lord tells the prophet to avoid in Isaiah 8 is the fear of the Assyrians that is sweeping over the people.¹⁷¹ The danger for the godly is not what the people fear (i.e., the Assyrians), but the fear itself that has captivated the people.

This same kind of fear, Peter says, is not to take control of the life of the Christian when he faces his persecutors. Instead, Christ should control his life, filling him with a deep-seated inward confidence that God is ultimately in control, not one's human opponents.¹⁷²

If you fear the threat these perpetrators embody and allow them to disturb you, you will want to retaliate. The moment you do this, you actually show that

you have allowed the very same perpetrators to become “lords” of your life, determining your lifestyle and attitude. Therefore, revere only Christ as Lord by being ready to witness to your hope, and by keeping a clear conscience.¹⁷³

In their insightful article “Isaiah in 1 Peter 3:13–17,” Fika van Rensburg and Steve Moyise note:

The utilisation of Isaiah in 1 Peter 3:13–17 is both straightforward and complex. From a structural analysis of 1 Peter, it seems relatively clear what the author is trying to say: Do not allow fear to govern your behaviour but revere Christ as Lord. And the quoted text says much the same thing: Do not fear what they fear but revere the Lord your God.¹⁷⁴

With Christ as the Lord of their lives, Christians can be assured “of the grace and strength to stand firm in the midst of suffering for His sake.”¹⁷⁵

In 3:15, Peter goes on to assert that by not giving in to fear but living with this Christ-centered confidence, those undergoing persecution should be prepared to bear witness to their opponents of the nature of the hope that dominates their lives.¹⁷⁶ The word for “answer” used in verse 15, ἀπολογία, is frequently used to refer to an official interrogation (see Acts 25:16; 25:2; 2 Timothy 4:16). It can, however, also mean an informal questioning.¹⁷⁷ It is not clear from the context which meaning is meant in 3:15.

Regardless, when asked by their attackers why fear does not dominate their life, the attitude of believers should be consistent with the one who gives us such hope. It should be an attitude marked with gentleness, respect, a clean conscience, not with arrogance, disrespect, or retaliation.¹⁷⁸

In verse 17, Peter refers to how their good behavior will be reviled by their society. As mentioned earlier, it would appear that for Peter’s readers, the persecutor’s hatred was primarily generated by the way the believers lived (4:4).¹⁷⁹ This is as it ought to be. Peter would hate to think that the followers of Jesus would be persecuted for not acting like Christ, but they may have. It is conceivable that some had suffered for not exhibiting the Christlike response referred to above, which is why Peter so stresses it. To suffer for acting in such a manner is shameful and unworthy of Christ.

But if they suffer for doing what is right—which is odd, as no one should (4:14,17), then it will be their persecutors who will be shamed. Additionally, their suffering must be because God has willed it so (3:17). It is not always God’s will for His people to suffer, but sometimes it is. This and the use of the phrases “called” (2:21; 3:9) emphasize Peter’s conviction that the call to follow Jesus is a call to suf-

fer, and that nothing comes into the life of the believer that does not first go through the sovereign hands of God.

In 3:18, the apostle draws our attention to the once-for-all death of Christ and the good that came from this. Because of His suffering for our sins, we are reconciled to God, given new life, and rescued from our hopeless condition. With this in mind, the believer can have confidence of God's presence and grace to stand in the midst of his suffering, knowing that God may be accomplishing great good through our sacrifice for Him.

1 Peter 4:12–19

In both verses 14 and 17 of chapter 3, Peter uses an unusual verb form (optative) to refer to the fact that it is possible, but unusual and unlikely, that people should suffer for doing what is right.¹⁸⁰ However, he immediately corrects himself in both cases, knowing full well that what should not happen actually does happen. In 4:12–19, he goes even further by saying to his readers, “*Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you*” (4:12).

In 4:3–10, Peter urges his readers to be faithful stewards of the “*manifold grace of God*” in a context of living sacrificially for others in a world where there is a marked difference between society and loyalty to God.¹⁸¹ This grace is the same grace that enables them to live sacrificially for God when society expresses first surprise at the new loyalties of the Christian (4:4) and then hostility (4:12–19).

Peter calls their sufferings a “fiery trial” (*purwsei*) in 4:12. In 1:6,7, Peter had already talked about their faith being tried by “*various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*”¹⁸² In the same way as smelting does not create gold, but merely brings it to the surface, so suffering does not create genuine faith; it merely shows if it is really there.

Peter further reminds the readers that their faithfulness may not be rewarded in this life, but they can be assured that it has not gone unnoticed. Their faith in God will be rewarded at the revelation of Jesus, to be displayed and delighted in as something precious and of great value.¹⁸³

In the meantime, Peter introduces in 4:13 a new and indispensable aspect of suffering: when Christians suffer for the right cause—the cause of Christ—they “*share the sufferings of Christ.*” Ton notes:

It is true that whenever Peter speaks about the sufferings of Christ, he always refers to Christ's historic sufferings; but in this place, he does not specify to which

sufferings he refers, the historic ones or the present ones. Moreover, due to the fact that Peter is so close in his theology both to the teaching of Jesus and to that of Paul, we can safely assume, Christ is present in them through the Holy Spirit, and that Christ suffers in them in such a way that *their* sufferings are a sharing in *His* sufferings.¹⁸⁴

Understanding our suffering in this light, we have cause to rejoice, knowing that we will have even greater reason to rejoice in the future when He is revealed in His glory (4:13). The believer who faces insults for the sake of Christ is to be congratulated, for his suffering is evidence that God's glorious Spirit rests upon him (4:14).¹⁸⁵ These words echo Isaiah 11:2 where the Spirit of the Lord is said to rest upon the branch of Jesse.¹⁸⁶ The same Spirit that rests upon the suffering Servant of the Lord rests upon His servants as they suffer.

The list of reasons that Peter provides in 4:15 for why Christians should not suffer is rather surprising. The sins listed characterize the pagan world rather than a Christian lifestyle. However, given the discussion in chapter 3, it is possible that Peter fears that this is a lifestyle that his readers will fall into, should they allow fear to control their lives rather than the Lord. The call of verse 15 is to persevere and to allow God's grace to have full reign in their lives.

He reminds them that there is no shame in suffering for one's identity as a follower of Christ (4:16). Perhaps the reader is to recall Peter's own shame at his denial of Christ, when he refused to acknowledge that he was a follower of Jesus. Peter encourages the believers not to follow his previous example. Instead, rather than pulling back from the name of Jesus as he had done at Jesus' trial, the reader should "*glorify God in that name*" in the midst of his trials.

In Acts 14:22, Paul said that "*through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.*" In 4:17,18, Peter refers to this as God's "judgment" that begins with the household of faith. The Old Testament prophets also spoke of judgment that would come to God's people before that of the unrighteous.¹⁸⁷ In Matthew 24:9–14, we also note that God's judgment begins with the Christians "in the refining fire of affliction . . . and is completed in the sentence of condemnation pronounced on the unbelieving world at the advent of Christ."¹⁸⁸

The "judgment" (*krima*) referred to in 4:17 is not in its last decisive act of the final judgment but in its gradual development.¹⁸⁹ In the persecution of the Church, God's judgment may be seen as in process already, heading toward its culmination at the judgment of the world. At this stage of God's judgment, the goal is not punishment but a preparation of God's people for heaven with its privileges and responsibilities, as persecution reveals the kind of people they really are.

With that in mind, believers “*who suffer according to God’s will*” ought to “*entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good*” (4:19). They should avail themselves of all of God’s grace and practice doing good. It is the proud man, Peter implies in the next chapter, who thinks that he would be able to stand on his own (5:5). It is to those who humbly acknowledge their dependency on Him that God gives grace—the ability to suffer for doing wrong and endure.

1 Peter 5:5–11

Peter begins to conclude his letter in verse 6, by encouraging these dear believers to, therefore,

Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because He cares for you.

As you put your trust in God’s grace to sustain you, you realize that you have no reason to fear your oppressor, because God cares for you. How tragic that whenever we desire to be self-sufficient, we end up controlled by our fears. It is impossible to stand up to the pressures of persecution in such a state. Only in a trusting, dependent relationship with Christ can we be freed from the tyranny of fear and a troubled mind (3:14).

Be sober minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. (5:8,9)

The example of the Persecuted Church has a tremendous pastoral value for those undergoing trials and tribulations of all sorts, including persecution (but not exclusively). Witnessing the grace of God in the lives of others reminds us that God has not forsaken us. We are reminded that if He can help our brothers and sisters to go through the most horrendous situations and keep them faithful to Himself, He can help us too. As we witness the persecution of the Church around world, we are also reminded of the truth that suffering for Christ is an inseparable part of life for as long as believers live “in the world” that rejects Christ and them. It is not always just the message of Christ that is offensive to the world; at times it is even the mere presence of His followers.

Our calling is to remember who our enemy is and to recognize that our task is not to fight Satan—Christ has already defeated him—but to resist him. We are to refuse to fear him and his roaring, and to be firm in our trust in God, knowing that He is sustaining others around the world too.

In verse 10 Peter writes, “*After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace [there is that word again], who had called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.*” This is the only place in the New Testament where God is called “the God of all grace.” He is the source and giver of all grace; all of His divine power, bestowed on us in great variety, supplies help for every need and occasion. He works for us and in us to accomplish His purposes, as we are unable to do this for ourselves. Having proved Himself rich in grace in saving us from sin and its penalty, we can trust Him to supply all of our present needs, and give us a hope for a glorious future of His eternal glory in Christ.

While God’s people may suffer for a little while now, we know that we have a glorious future. This is our “calling.” This is not to minimize the reality of our present sufferings; God offers encouragement in its midst. We are reminded that this world is not all that there is.

In the meantime, the work of grace that God has begun in the lives of His people will not fall short despite the suffering that they must endure. Peter says that God will:

- *Restore* them in the areas where they break down and fail.
- *Confirm* them, giving them the inflexibility and support needed to withstand the temptations to deny Him without toppling.
- *Strengthen* them to resist Satan and to endure even to the point of death without collapsing.
- *Establish* them, giving them a firm foundation so that they will not be swept away. Left to their own unaided strength, they would fall.¹⁹⁰

Through their suffering God produces a fully restored and confirmed personal character in His people. Though Satan seeks to destroy, God takes his actions and turns them into the means by which He graciously develops His character into the lives of His people. Just as with Christ, there was no glory without His suffering, so it is with His children. Suffering never thwarts God’s purposes. Indeed, God knows no other formula but that of self-sacrifice and self-giving. This is His means of grace in a rebellious and fallen world.

In response to all this, Peter concludes, “*To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.*” To Him, who thus acts on behalf of His persecuted people around the world, *to Him and to Him alone*, all praise is due. May we never be found to give the persecuted Christians the glory that belongs only to God for their faithfulness and testimonies of courage. As we reflect the image of Christ in our lives, this is indeed

“the true grace of God” in which we are to stand firm to the end. *“To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*

2 Peter

The only reference to persecution in 2 Peter is found in 1:12–15 where Peter says, *“I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.”*

In the previous verses, Peter had reminded his readers of the fact that God’s divine power has *“given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness”* (1:3, NIV). Peter reminds us that, when we came to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ in response to His gracious call (1:3), God by His great power bestowed on us everything we need to stand faithful (1:3,4). Everything we need has been given to us in Christ. The call is to appropriate what God has already given us in our daily life (1:5–9). If we do this, Peter says, we will never fall (1:10) and will be richly rewarded in the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (1:11).¹⁹¹

In 1:12–15, it is obvious that Peter expects to be martyred soon (verse 14), but he wants his readers to be able to stand after his departure and so he has no hesitation in reminding them of these truths.

JOHN

1 John

The purpose of 1 John is recorded in 5:13: *“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.”* John addresses himself to a group of believers who are being troubled by those who claimed that it was not necessary to accept Jesus as the Son of God in order to know God. Among their unorthodox teachings was the apparent belief that it was possible not to sin and thus have no need for the forgiveness through the death of Jesus. These dissidents claimed to have had special revelations that contradicted the clear teachings of the Old Testament Scriptures and the apostles, and de-emphasized the need for love among those who called themselves God’s children. They preached, as Marshall puts it, *“Christianity without tears.”*¹⁹² John writes to assure these confused believers that, contrary to what they were hearing, they really are recipients of eternal life, and to reveal the teachings of these dissidents for what they are: darkness, lies, hatred of God and man, rebellion against God, worldly, and self-deceptive.

In 3:12, John refers to Cain's murder of Abel who was killed because his deeds were righteous while his brother's were evil. Cain saw that Abel's acts won God's approval—as evidenced in God's acceptance of his sacrifice in Genesis 4:5—while his was not and he was angry that this was so.¹⁹³ This incidence of martyrdom is the basis on which John makes his next statement in 3:13, *“Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.”*

The world's actions—also evidenced by those causing division in the church through their false teaching—are evil and those who do evil always hate those who do what is right. “John clearly has in mind (in this verse) not simply people outside the church who may persecute Christians but also people within the church whose lack of love demonstrates that they are not truly believers.”¹⁹⁴

First John 3:12, in its context, is helpful for those who may not live in restricted nations or societies hostile to the Christian message and/or presence. Hatred for the truth and its messengers may even be found within the fellowship of those who call themselves “Christians.” The follower of Jesus who steadfastly holds to the truth should not be surprised when encountering opposition. Indeed, the witness of Scripture is entirely universal in its assertion that this is to be expected. Also, the exclusive claims of Christ (4:15; 5:12) increasingly subject Christians in restricted and “free” societies to accusations of intolerance and hatred. This is not all unlike the accusations of the early church who were often accused by the Romans of being “haters of mankind” because of their rejection of the Roman deities.¹⁹⁵

2 John

The false teachers who oppose John also appear in 2 John 7–11. The “elect lady” to whom John writes is instructed not to receive such teachers into her house or to greet them as fellow Christians. If we take this teaching together with 1 John, we find that while we are to love those who persecute us, to pray for and forgive them, we are not to act as if the differences between us do not matter.

3 John

In 3 John, we find the opposite situation as in 2 John. Here we have a man named Diotrephes who does not recognize John's authority. He speaks *“wicked nonsense”* (verse 10) against John and refuses to welcome his coworkers into the church.¹⁹⁶

While there is no evidence that Diotrephes held to any heresy of belief, he is guilty of heresy of practice. Because of his ambition and distrust of John's influence and leadership, he actively resisted the work of God. As in 1 John, it is helpful to note that resistance to the messengers and message of God may also come from those who claim to be Christians.

For several years, I have kept a copy of a poem by Evangeline Paterson in my wallet and posted in my office as a reminder of the need to hold to the truth not only in belief but also in practice.¹⁹⁷

Lament

Weep, weep for those
Who do the work of the Lord
With a high look
And a proud heart.
Their voice is lifted up
In the streets, and their cry is heard.
The bruised reed they break
By their great strength, and the smoking flax
They trample.

Weep not for the quenched
(For their God will hear their cry
And the Lord will come to save them)
But weep, weep for the quenchers

For when the Day of the Lord
Is come, and the vales sing
And the hills clap their hands
And the light shines

Then their eyes shall be opened
On a waste place,
Smouldering,
The smoke of the flax bitter
In their nostrils,
Their feet pierced
By broken reed-stems . . .
Wood, hay, and stubble,
And no grass springing.
And all the birds flown.

Weep, weep for those
Who have made a desert
In the name of the Lord.¹⁹⁸

Revelation

It is the book of Revelation that represents John's most significant contribution to our study. Three observations are in order:

1. **Revelation was meant to be read as a totality.** In Revelation 1:3 we read: *“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”* An often neglected principle of reading the book of Revelation is that it was written to be read aloud, in a community setting, not necessarily privately. Written at a time of intense persecution, its message was meant to be heard by the entire congregation, probably in one reading. It was intended to be received as a whole rather than taken in pieces with every small detail dissected and deciphered as so many have tended to do over the centuries. The impact of Revelation is in its whole rather than its details. Read aloud, the hearers picture the visions in their mind and gain a perspective that is lost when the book is read in bits and pieces. The symbolic language enhances understanding of the book as a whole rather than detracts from it when read as it was intended to be.
2. **Revelation was written with a historical audience and purpose in mind.** Revelation was written in a particular setting, to a specific group of churches (Revelation 1—3) for a specific purpose: to encourage those going through tribulation and persecution in the later part of the first century with a revelation of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:1).¹⁹⁹

At the time of the book's writing, Rome was ruled by emperors who claimed to be *Dominus et Deus noster* (our Lord and God).²⁰⁰ Yet, as John looks to the throne room of heaven, he witnesses the elders bowing before the throne and saying this precise phrase in 4:11:

*“Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.”*

This is a treasonous statement in the Roman world at the time of this writing and is a direct challenge to the exclusive claims of the Imperium.²⁰¹ For the Christian, the unity of the human race was symbolized not by the Emperor, but by the incarnation of Christ.²⁰² They could never bow the knee to the “genius” of the emperors whose heads were gilded from the days of Nero onwards with darting rays in token to their divine solar ancestry.²⁰³ To do so would be to

insult the God of heaven. To not do so, however, was a political statement that could not go unchallenged by the authorities.

Hence, while much of the persecution prior to this time had been at the hands of mobs instigated by religious leaders, toward the end of Nero's reign the Church found itself in conflict with the political powers of the empire as the emperor made the decision to allow Christianity to be accused of being an illicit superstition and subject to state prosecution.²⁰⁴ This only deepened with the reign of Domitian, when Christianity came to be considered not only an illicit religion but atheism.²⁰⁵

There is no direct evidence in John's book to indicate the precise date for its writing. Hence, there is some debate as to whether the book was written during the reign of Nero (A.D. 54–68) or Domitian (A.D. 81–96). The arguments for both dates are almost equally convincing, though most scholars hold to the later date.

When John receives this revelation of Jesus, he was being punished for being a religious and political rebel. He had been deported to the island of Patmos "*on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus*" (1:9) and knew that the churches in Asia Minor for which he had oversight were also undergoing great trials.

It is evident that Revelation was written to provide the churches with what they most desperately needed. As we have established in this study, God's priority is not so much to answer the questions that His people may have about why they are persecuted as to give them a revelation of Himself. We see this response in John's vision as well. John's churches are to be sent a message containing a "*revelation of Jesus Christ*" (1:9–20). It is written as a letter of hope, a letter that proclaims, "The battle is not over, though the victory has already been won through the sacrifice of the Lamb. He is risen and stands in your midst. Continue your faithful witness. God's purposes are being fulfilled through your life and death. He is with you, as He promised. Do not lose hope. All things will be made new. The time of tears will soon be over."

Of course, this book provides tremendous help to Christians of any age undergoing persecution, but it is important to remember that there was an original audience. Each of the seven churches to whom John wrote in chapters 2–3 faced issues that, though common to all churches everywhere, are especially critical to congregations facing opposition because of their faith in and identification with Jesus Christ. In His words to the churches in Asia Minor, Jesus speaks to the concerns that these churches must address in such an environ-

ment. When faced with persecution, some churches, like the one in Ephesus, in their zeal to defend the faith, become bastions of strict, unloving orthodoxy (2:1–7). Others, like the church in Smyrna, need to be encouraged not to give in to fear in the face of suffering (2:8–11). The scourge of false doctrine creeping in from the outside endangers some faithful churches, like the one in Pergamum (2:12–17). Yet others, like in Thyatira, struggle to maintain ethical and moral purity, especially when the culture demands compromise in order to continue to make a living (2:18–29). The church in Sardis illustrates that persecuted Christians are not immune from spiritual deadness (3:1–6), while some churches, as in Philadelphia, need to be encouraged to look beyond their own neediness to the opportunities that God has placed before them (3:7–13). The Laodicean church might well represent the church that, like in Corinth, forgets that this world is not all there is. Such churches deal with opposition by assimilation into the culture and adopting the trappings of success. They forget that the time to sit on thrones is in the future (3:21), not today. The task of the Christ's Church is to carry the cross in the pursuit of the goals of the kingdom of God. By pursuing the goals of this world, the Laodiceans may have removed the offense of the cross, but they had incurred the offense of Christ.

Great and wonderful promises are given to those who listen to the words of Christ and overcome: the privilege of eating from the tree of life in the renewed creation (2:7); a crown of life (2:11); sustenance to complete the journey and assurance of entry into the kingdom of heaven (2:17); authority to rule over the nations as an inheritance in a place where there is no night (2:26–28); white garments fit for appearing in the presence of God with the multitude of those who have loved, served and acknowledged Him before men, with the pledge that Christ will acknowledge them before the Father (3:4,5); an assured place in the kingdom (temple) of God, with a new ownership, citizenship, and identity in Christ (3:12); and the right to reign with Him in His kingdom (3:21).

- 3. The restoration and victory of God in Revelation is set in a cosmic struggle.** Restoration of God's creation will come but it will come in the context of pain and struggle. The Lamb overcomes, but it requires that He be fatally wounded in the process (5:6). His messengers, likewise, overcome, but it involves their suffering and death as well (6:9–11; 12:10,11; 20:4). One of the key themes in Revelation is the reference to the followers of Jesus as giving "testimony" (*marturia*). This testimony, in Revelation, always involves suffering and death: "the testimony of Jesus" (1:9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4); "their testimony" (6:9; 11:7; 12:11).²⁰⁶

As Hurtado notes, “This use of the Greek terms for ‘witness’ and ‘testimony’ in Revelation anticipates (and probably helped to shape) the subsequent special Christian use of the terms for ‘martyrs’ and ‘martyrdom.’”²⁰⁷ Behind it all is the knowledge that it is the “faithful witness” Jesus (1:5) who “exemplifies the steadfastness to the word of God in the face of death that followers of Jesus are to exhibit.”²⁰⁸ As Ton notes:

The key message of the Book of Revelation is that the only methods God uses to bring the nations to Himself is through the testimony of Jesus Christ, propagated by His faithful witnesses, sealed with their blood in martyrdom, and vindicated by God through their resurrection. In God’s strategy, the use of force is counterproductive. It is true that one can bend and break people by force, but the result will only be more hatred and further revolt. Instead, God had determined to save the world by the foolishness of the cross of Christ and by the foolishness of the crosses of His children whom He has chosen and called for this very purpose. He will be consistent in using this unique method until He achieves His final goal. God will thus bring the nations to Himself by the sacrifice of His Son followed by the sacrifices of His other sons.²⁰⁹

The struggle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Genesis 3:15) is mirrored in chapter 12. The very structure of the book reflects this struggle, as God brings to fruition His plan as the visions, starting in chapter 4, alternate between hope and despair, victory and oppression:²¹⁰

VICTORY/HOPE	OPPRESSION/DESPAIR
4:1—5:14: Throne and Lamb	6:1–7: first six seals
7:1—8:4: multitude of the faithful and the seventh seal	8:5—9:21: first six trumpets
10:1—11:1: dramatic interlude in heaven	11:2–14: attack of the “beasts”
11:15–19: seventh trumpet	12:1–17: the dragon assaults the woman
14:1–7: Mount Zion and the Lamb	13:1–18: the beast with horns
15:2–8: the martyrs worship God	14:8—15:1: destruction and judgment
19:1–16: worship in heaven	16:1–20: seven bowls of wrath
21:1—22:5: new heaven, new earth, new Jerusalem	17:1—18:24: fall of Babylon
	19:17—20:15: final judgment

As one reads Revelation the recurring theme of the victory of God can be seen, as illustrated in the following outline:²¹¹

AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Introduction

Prologue (1:1–8)

Christ standing among the seven lampstands (1:9—3:22)

Main Section

CYCLE 1: SEVEN SEALS (4:1—8:1)

1. Vision of heaven (4:1—5:14)
2. Seal 1: warrior on a white horse (6:1,2)
3. Seal 2: warrior on a red horse (6:3,4)
4. Seal 3: rider on a black horse (6:5,6)
5. Seal 4: death riding on a black horse (6:7,8)
6. Seal 5: martyrs in heaven (6:9–11)
7. Seal 6: earthquakes/the heavens in turmoil (6:12–17)
8. The seal interlude: (7:1–17)
 - a. the sealing of God's people (7:1–8)
 - b. a celebration of God's victory (7:9–17)
9. Seal 7: The coming of the end (8:1)

CYCLE 2: SEVEN TRUMPETS (8:2—11:19)

1. Vision of heaven (8:2–6)
2. Trumpet 1: judgment on the earth (8:7)
3. Trumpet 2: judgment on the sea (8:8,9)
4. Trumpet 3: judgment on the springs of water (8:10,11)
5. Trumpet 4: judgment on the heavens (8:12)
6. Trumpet 5: locusts from the pit (8:13—9:12)
7. Trumpet 6: the cavalry of judgment (9:13–20)
8. The trumpet interlude: (10:1—11:14)
 - a. the eating of the scroll (10:1–11)
 - b. the two witnesses (11:1–14)
9. Trumpet 7: God has been victorious! (11:15–19)

CYCLE 3: SEVEN SYMBOLIC HISTORIES (12:1—14:20)

1. The dragon's war against the Son, the woman, and the woman's offspring (12:1–6)
2. The dragon thrown down (12:7–17)
3. The beast from the sea (13:1–10)
4. The beast from the earth (13:11–18)
5. The Lamb on Mount Zion (14:1–5)
6. Angelic pronouncements of judgment (14:6–13)

7. Harvest [Jesus returns] (14:14–20)

CYCLE 4: SEVEN BOWLS (15:1—16:21)

1. Vision of heaven (15:1—16:1)
2. Bowl 1: sores (16:2)
3. Bowl 2: sea becomes blood (16:3)
4. Bowl 3: rivers become blood (16:4–7)
5. Bowl 4: scorching sun (16:8,9)
6. Bowl 5: darkness (16:10,11)
7. Bowl 6: mobilization for the final battle [Armageddon] (16:12–14)
8. The bowl interlude (16:15)
 - a) “I am coming”
 - b) “Stay awake”
9. Bowl 7: The final judgment against evil (16:16–21)

CYCLE 5: SEVEN PRONOUNCEMENTS AGAINST BABYLON (17:1—19:10)

1. Description and pronouncements of judgment of Babylon (17:1—18:24)
2. Celebration of God’s victory (19:1–10)

CYCLE 6: WHITE HORSE JUDGMENTS (19:11–21)

1. Jesus returns to defeat evil (19:11–21)

CYCLE 7: WHITE THRONE JUDGMENTS (20:1—21:8)

1. Binding of Satan (20:1–3)
2. The resurrection (20:4–6)
3. The final judgment of Satan (20:7–10)
4. The final judgment of the unrighteous (20:11–15)
5. The new heaven, the new earth, the new Jerusalem (21:1—22:5)

CONCLUSION

Final instructions and exhortations (22:6–21)

However bad things might get for God’s people, Revelation helps us to see that there is always hope. Defeat may seem imminent, but so is victory. The victory is not, as some might suppose, the punishment and destruction of the wicked; the victory is the vindication of the Church.²¹² Redeemed, triumphant in heaven, secure forever with the Lamb who won the victory for Himself and the Church through His death and His conquest over it, the Church participates in this victory with Christ as Bride and Bridegroom. By refusing to deny their allegiance to Him and acknowledge the idolatrous claims of the world order (13:15; 14:9), enduring even unto death, the martyrs share in Christ’s victory over it and in His triumph over all the powers of evil.²¹³

As we read Revelation, we are struck by how God's prophecy to Satan in Genesis 3 is fulfilled. Satan is defeated, first of all, as the world witnesses the message and testimony of God's witnesses even unto death. The truth of God shines through and people give glory to God and are delivered from the deception of Satan (11:13).

Two other ways in which Satan is defeated by persecution in Revelation are seen in 12:10,11:

And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death."

The persecuted defeat Satan, secondly, by the blood of the Lamb (12:11). They demonstrate that they belong to Christ, having been delivered from Satan's ownership. When Satan accuses them before God (just as he did Job) that God's people do not love and trust God with pure motives but only for what they get from Him, persecution shows that their loyalty to God is more than just for ulterior motives.

Thirdly, God's people defeat Satan by showing that they are not afraid to die (12:11). *"They conquered him... by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death."*

Ton asks the question, "Why must the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of His fellow soldiers take place?"

The answer is that God does not fight to win people back to Himself; He will not use force. From the beginning, Satan has used deception to win people to himself, and throughout history, he has relied on lies, hatred, brute force, torture, and death to keep people in bondage and slavery. But God cannot use the same methods. He must use methods *consistent with His own nature*. He could conceivably force His way to the nations of the world, but that would be against His own nature and character.²¹⁴

Revelation brings God's plan of restoration to its final conclusion (21:5). What began in Genesis, then was introduced in the Law, the prophets, and poets of the Old Testament, reached its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and was given to the whole world through the sacrificial self-giving of God's servants, who *"loved not their lives even unto death"* (12:11). This was God's chosen way. Indeed, it was His only way, if He were to be true to His character, to accomplish His purposes. To this day, it continues to be God's way and will be until the day of His return when He will ultimately and finally defeat sin and Satan (20:10).

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (22:20)

Why Hasn't Jesus Come Back Yet?

In all the discussions, dissertations, or fictional accounts of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, one question that is almost never seriously asked is "Why hasn't Jesus come back?" For all of the unanswered questions about the Second Coming and the varying interpretations of how and when it will come about, the Scriptures are fairly clear on this one question.

To discover the first reason, we begin in Acts 1:1,2, where Luke explains:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

After Jesus' suffering, He showed Himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that He was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. Then in the following verses, Luke records some of the things Jesus talked about:

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. (1:4,5)

Then in verses 6–11 Luke tells of Jesus' last teaching on the kingdom of God:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Now, think about the events that led to this question. Jesus had been arrested, judged, crucified, buried. With His death, all dreams that the disciples might have had of Jesus creating the kingdom of God on earth had ended. To the disciples, the cross had been a defeat.

But then they find that He has risen from the dead! And their dreams come to life too. They undoubtedly wondered if maybe now was when Jesus would set up the kingdom of God! And so they asked him (1:6). And how does He reply?

It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (1:7,8)

Put another way, Jesus says, this is none of your business. God knows. You don't. And He isn't telling.

Rather than being preoccupied with when the kingdom will be restored, the disciples had another task that needed to be done first. And they were promised that they would receive God's power to do it. Their task was not to worry about when the kingdom is coming; their task was to be His witnesses. They had been witnesses to the most wonderful event that had ever happened and they were to be entrusted with the task of telling others what God had done for them too.

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (1:9)

What has been done for the whole world needed be told to the world so that others could experience what the disciples had experienced. The kingdom of God could not be limited to the few who have witnessed the resurrection. A victory had been won for the whole world! Their task is to see others set free from the power of sin, by witnessing to the victory of God.

Having given His commission, as His disciples were looking on, Jesus then ascended until a cloud took Him out of their sight. We read that they kept looking intently up into the sky as He was going until suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them.

Then comes one of the strangest questions in the Bible: *"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven?"*

Imagine if you had been there. You had just seen someone float up into the sky. Even for Jesus this was amazing! And you are asked, "Why are you looking up into the sky?" At first glance, the angel's question seems almost humorous.

I think that behind the question, however, there is a subtle hint. The disciples were being asked, "Men of Galilee, don't you have other things to do than stand looking into heaven? Jesus will return but something has to happen first. You need to be His witnesses and to do that you need to wait in Jerusalem until you receive the Holy Spirit who will make it possible."

"This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11)

Hearing this, verse 12 tells us, they returned to Jerusalem, where after ten days, they do receive the Spirit and in the years to come they witness for Christ throughout the known world. Tradition tells us that eventually all but John would die for their faith in the process of fulfilling God's plan. And motivating them was the hope of Jesus' return, as the angels had said.

Throughout the New Testament, the proclamation of the gospel and the Second Coming of Jesus are tied together. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28, we read that Jesus told His disciples to go and make other disciples in all nations, promising that He would be with them wherever they went, to the very end of history. The connection between the preaching of the gospel and the end is noteworthy.

In Matthew 24, Jesus spoke about the terrible things that will take place in the end times and in the middle of His description He said, “*And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, **and then the end will come***” (24:14, emphasis added). Simply put, when the gospel has been preached to the whole world, Jesus will return and the kingdom will come in its fullness.

In Acts 2, after the promise of the Holy Spirit has been fulfilled, we find Peter linking the Second Coming of Christ and the repenting of the people in verses 20 and 21. In chapter 3, he does it again when he says in verses 19–21:

*Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, **and that he may send the Christ** appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.* (emphasis added)

The repenting of people and the coming of Christ are linked.

Years later, when Peter is an old man, he finds himself in the position of having to defend the fact that Jesus has not yet returned. People are beginning to ridicule the Christians for saying that Jesus is coming back. “He’s not coming back,” they scoff. Some Christians, hearing this, are beginning to wonder, especially now that they are suffering so much for their faith. It has been so long since Jesus promised to come back. Perhaps the skeptics are right.

Peter responds in 2 Peter 3:9: “*The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*”

Why hasn’t Jesus returned, according to Peter? He is waiting for more people to repent. The task of witnessing is not over yet. Christ’s work is done. Our work is not. God is being gracious and He is waiting for more people to come to Christ.

But there’s a second reason why Jesus has not yet returned, and it is related to the first. As God’s people are faithful to witness for Christ, they will be persecuted, even killed for the sake of the gospel. In Revelation 6:9,10 we read these words: “*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 witness they had borne. They cried out with a*

loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’”

How long, O Lord, they cry out, until You return and judge? They are answered in verse 11:

Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

According to this passage, the answer to the question “When will Jesus return?” is simple. It is when the last martyr has been killed, the last witness has been slain because of his/her testimony. God will say, “It is finished!” (16:17).²¹⁵ The gates will be closed, heaven will be sealed, and Christ will return to judge the world. The restoration of God’s creation will be complete.

It seems to me a significant thing that martyrdom marks both the beginning and the ending of physical death on this planet. Both the first and the last person to be killed are martyrs. The question that we need to ask ourselves is: “Am I prepared to be that last martyr for Jesus?”

A cross-centered gospel requires cross-carrying messengers.

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End Notes

Preface

1. Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Fortress Press, 1976: 35.

Chapter 1

1. This concept is in contrast to Islam and its imposition of Sharia law.
2. Paul Marshall, “Dooyeweerd’s Empirical Theory of Rights.” *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd*. ed. C. T. McIntire. University Press of America, 1985: 119–142.
3. Indeed, communism, being atheistic in orientation, actually denies it. Regarding Islam’s teaching, see Christine Schirrmacher, *The Islamic View of the Major Christian Teachings*. RVB International, 2001: 27,28; Bruce A. McDowell and Anees Zaka, *Muslims and Christians at the Table*. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1999: 125,126; Don Richardson, *Secrets of the Koran*. Regal Books, 2003: 141–143. In Surah 4:28, man is described as being created “weak.”
4. Paul Marshall, *A Christian Defense of Religious Liberty*. A position paper for Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, 1996: 1,2.
5. Ibid.: 2.
6. See section “God as Self-Giver” in Chapter 2 for further discussion of the difference between evangelism and proselytism.
7. Paul Marshall, *Religious Freedom in the World Today*. Broadman & Holman, 2000: 20.
8. Roderick T. Leupp, *Knowing the Name of God*. InterVarsity Press, 1996: 95.
9. Ibid.
10. Regarding the issues of the depravity of humankind and the freedom of the will, I am convinced that the differences between Wesleyan-Arminianism and Calvinism are not nearly as wide as has often been suggested. Personally, I believe that both bring valuable biblical perspectives that must be upheld, even though I am essentially Arminian in persuasion. Having said that, however, I believe that Arminians, historically, have not adequately reaffirmed their commitment to the biblical teachings of the depravity of

humankind and the bondage of the will. In a helpful departure from this tendency, Dr. Robert Picirilli lectured on the topic “Salvation by Faith Applied” in his series *Calvinism, Arminianism, and the Theology of Salvation*. (Leroy Forlines Lectures, Free Will Baptist Bible College, Nashville, TN. November 19–22, 2002):

Reformation Arminianism affirms the *total depravity* of human beings since Adam and Eve. We are born in sin, preferring evil to good, in willful rebellion against God and unable to change. The nature of human depravity creates a serious problem for soteriology. As naturally-born, depraved human beings, *no one is able*, no one can or will respond to the gospel offer in faith. Left alone, no person would ever accept Christ. . . . No person without help will choose God. . . . Arminians face the problem of depravity by acknowledging the need for a work of grace within the sinner to enable that sinner to exercise faith and be saved. Rather than regeneration, however, this is a work that Arminius called “prevenient” or “preventing” grace. This means grace that precedes, that goes before (i.e., “enabling grace,” or—even better—“pre-regenerating grace”). When the gospel is presented to a person, God’s Spirit must work within that person’s heart or mind to make it possible for that person, in spite of the inclinations and effects of depravity, to put faith in Christ and accept the gospel offer.

- 1) This is often called “conviction,” another way of saying “convincement”—one way of referring to this preregenerating work of the Spirit that accompanies the gospel and makes it possible for the depraved sinner to hear well enough to grasp and respond. The sinner must not just hear the gospel but must be convinced, convicted, of its truths.
- 2) This is sometimes called “drawing”: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me *draws* him.” When the gospel is preached under the convicting power of the Spirit of God, there is a tug at the heart that makes the gospel appealing.
- 3) This can also be expressed as “opening the heart”: of Lydia we read that “the Lord opened her heart.” The sinner’s heart is by nature closed too tightly to “hear” the truth. If faith comes by hearing, the Lord must open deaf ears to enable the sinner to hear with understanding.
- 4) We might also express this as “persuasion,” although that word gets pretty close to faith itself. But it isn’t quite. A person can be persuaded of the truth of something without making a personal commitment to that truth. When the gospel is preached and the Spirit does this gracious work, the sinner recognizes what he hears as true.

In summary, this pre-regenerating grace is:

- entirely gracious;
- preserves God’s personal dealings with us, enabling our wills without forcing them;
- makes faith possible without making it necessary;
- leads on to regeneration unless the sinner resists;
- requires the intelligent hearing of the gospel;

- enables both those who do receive Christ and those who hear the gospel with understanding and then reject Christ.
11. Proverbs 29:7; 31:8,9; Micah 6:8; Matthew 25:31–46; Hebrews 13:3; et al.
 12. Acts 16:37; 22:25–29; 25:10,11.
 13. David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2001” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. Vol. 27, No. 1, January 2003: 22.
 14. See Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out*. Word Books, 1997: 149–209; Nina Shea, *In the Lion’s Den*. Broadman & Holman, 1997: 13–16.
 15. Forum 18 News Service, January 13, 2004
<www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=227>.
 16. Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. Zondervan Publishing House, 1978: 78.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Raymond C. Ortlund, “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Crossway Books, 1991: 97.
 19. Ibid.
 20. Ibid.: 97,98; see also Susan T. Foh, “What Is the Woman’s Desire?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 37 (1975): 376–383.
 21. Ortlund: 99.
 22. Kaiser: 76.
 23. A. E. Wilder-Smith, *Why Does God Allow It?* Master Books, 1980: 51.
 24. See section “God as Self-Giver” in Chapter 2.
 25. John E. Hartley, q[חָ] (sā‘aq) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 772.
 26. Paul Marshall, “Human Rights” in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*. ed. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers. Baker Books: 2004: 313.
 27. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary. Revised edition*. SCM Press, 1961: 211.
 28. Ibid.
 29. LeLand Ryken, James C. Wilmot, Tremper Longman III, “Hide, Hiding” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. InterVarsity Press, 1998: 383.
 30. Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Herald Press, 1987: 53.
 31. von Rad: 133.
 32. For example, see Exodus 17:4 where Moses is threatened with stoning by the people.

33. John C. Maxwell, *Deuteronomy*, The Communicator's Commentary. Word Books, 1987: 302.
34. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10—34:12*, Word Biblical Commentary, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002: 673.
35. Maxwell: 303.
36. Ibid.: 306.
37. E. A. Speiser, "The Biblical Idea of History in Its Common Near Eastern Setting" in *The Jewish Expression*. ed. Judah Goldin. Yale University Press, 1976: 2.
38. Mesopotamian cultures include Babylonian, Chaldean, Assyrian, Elam, Anatolia, Hurrian, Hittite, Ugarit, and Alalakh.
39. Speiser: 3.
40. Ibid.: 4. This emphasis is clearly seen in Mesopotamian war records where the perceived need for continued divine favor in battle seems to be strongly emphasized. See also J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, Vol. 1. Princeton University Press, 1958: 188–208.
41. Speiser: 4; see also William W. Halo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History*. Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1971: 171,172.
42. Speiser: 3; Halo and Simpson: 175.
43. Speiser: 3.
44. Ibid.: 4.
45. Ibid.: 5; see also G. Herbert Livingston, *The Pentateuch in Its Cultural Environment*. Baker Book House, 1974, 1987: 123.
46. Livingston: 123.
47. Ibid.: 100. See also Pritchard: 173–187. As Livingston notes, one wonders at times how much of these accounts are actually factual and how much is royal bragging.
48. H. Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*. Williams and Norgate, 1951: 20,21. Cited by Speiser: 5,6. See also Halo and Simpson: 191.
49. Speiser: 9.
50. Ibid.: 15.
51. Speiser: 10,11.
52. See the discussion by E. S. Gerstenberger and W. Schrage, *Suffering*. Abingdon Press, 1977: 115,116.
53. Ibid.
54. Chart adapted from Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, Servant Books, 1986: 111.

55. And would lead us to commit the error that Gerstenberger and Schrage warn us against in footnote 52.
56. We find here a prime example of a legitimate form of civil disobedience. We may deduce, as well, that the care of these one hundred “dissidents” was likely done at the expense of the royal treasury, at great risk to Obadiah. To feed one hundred men over an extended period of time, even if only on bread and water, was no small task and would have taken considerable resources in the midst of a drought and famine.
57. My own experience with persecuted Christians on four continents has convinced me of the truth of this statement. More than for any gift or assistance that I bring to those who suffer for righteousness, I am thanked for simply coming and letting them know that they have not been forgotten.
58. The phrase “the crack in the curtain” comes from Edith Schaeffer in her book, *Affliction*. Fleming H. Revell Co., 1978. This is a highly recommended book on the subject of suffering, drawing heavily from the book of Job.
59. Edward R. Dalglish, “The Use of the Book of Psalms in the New Testament.” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 27, 1984: 27; Leslie C. Allen, *The Psalms*. Word Biblical Themes. Word, 1987: 126.
60. Dalglish: 27.
61. Ibid.
62. See Roger Nicole, “The Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament With Reference to the Doctrine of Plenary Inspiration,” *Evangelicals and Inerrancy*. ed. Ronald Youngblood. Thomas Nelson, 1984: 1–12 for a helpful discussion on the topic in general.
63. C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*. Fontana Books, 1965: 126.
64. Dodd: 30 argues that when two or more separate authors cite the same passage from the Old Testament, unless there are definite reasons to the contrary, “they represent to that extent a common tradition.”
65. Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34.
66. John 19:24.
67. Dodd: 92,93.
68. Allen: 88.
69. Ibid: 89.
70. This linking together of suffering and glory will be seen consistently throughout this study.
71. Dalglish: 29.
72. Dodd: 98.
73. Ibid.: 98,99.

74. Septuagint $\rho\lambda\upsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\iota\ \epsilon\pi\tau\omega\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha\omicron\upsilon\kappa\alpha\iota\ \epsilon\pi\epsilon\iota\eta\sigma\alpha\sigma\alpha\omicron\upsilon$.
75. Dodd: 99 argues, "It seems more probable that Jn. xix. 35 draws upon the present passage than that of the reference to the paschal victim of Exod. xii. 46. In neither case is there an exact quotation of the words of the LXX but Ps. xxxiv. 20 is slightly nearer to Jn. xix. 36."
76. The Greek word $\lambda\upsilon\tau\rho\upsilon\omicron\upsilon\kappa\alpha\iota$ (ransom) found the LXX version is a key word in the New Testament.
77. Dalglisch: 27,28.
78. Dodd: 101.
79. Ibid.: 100.
80. Ibid.: 100,101. $\nu\upsilon\mu\ \eta\lambda\gamma\upsilon\chi\iota\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\epsilon\tau\rho\alpha\kappa\tau\alpha\iota$ (John 12:27) comp. $\eta\lambda\gamma\upsilon\chi\iota\mu\omicron\upsilon\ \epsilon\pi\tau\alpha\rho\alpha\sigma\eta$ (Psalm 42:6).
81. Allen: 130.
82. Dodd: 59.
83. Ibid.: 97.
84. Dalglisch: 38. See also Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*. SCM Press, 1962: 611.
85. Dalglisch: 38.
86. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*. Word Biblical Commentary, Word, 1990: 459.
86. J. Clinton McCann, Jr. *The Book of Psalms*. The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IV. Abingdon Press, 1996: 1048.
88. Dalglisch: 38.
89. McCann: 1154.
90. It is possible that Paul may also have had this psalm in mind in Romans 8:31 when he wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"
91. Psalm 118 is, in fact, quoted more often in the New Testament than any other, in any context. Of the twelve references to Psalm 118 in the New Testament, all but three (Matthew 23:39; Luke 13:35; 19:38 referring to Psalm 118:26) are relevant to our study.
92. Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*. Word Biblical Commentary. Word, 1983: 125.
93. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms 101–150*. The Anchor Bible. Doubleday and Company, 1970: 159.
94. Robert G. Bratcher and William D. Reyerburn, *A Handbook on the Psalms*. United Bible Societies, 1991: 993.
95. Athanasius, *The Letter to Marcellinus*. <www.athanasius.com/psalms/aletterm.htm>.
96. Ibid.

97. Ibid. I have taken the liberty to emphasize those passages that are particularly relevant to this study.
98. Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Skeptics Ask*. Victor Books, 1992: 242.
99. Tate: 88,89.
100. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*. InterVarsity Press, 1973: 27.
101. Ibid.: 28.
102. Ibid.: 88.
103. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “A Bonhoeffer Sermon.” *Theology Today* 38, 1982: 469.
104. It may also be helpful to note that God is mentioned as a God of love more often in the Old Testament than in the New (Geisler and Howe: 242).
105. Tate: 89.
106. Ibid.
107. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*. trans. James H. Burtness. Augsburg Publishing Co., 1970: 20,21.
108. Bonhoeffer, “A Bonhoeffer Sermon.”
109. Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: Prayer Book of the Bible*: 21.
110. Tate: 90.
111. A marked exception is the outstanding commentary on Ecclesiastes by Duane A. Garrett in *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. New American Commentary. Broadman, 1993.
112. Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. InterVarsity Press, 1964: 174.
113. Robert D. Culver, fPVĔ (shāpat,) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 949; gyRi (dīn) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 188.
114. Eberhard Jüngel, *Christ, Justice and Peace*. T&T Clark, 1992: 47.
115. The Barmen Theological Confession was a courageous statement of faith produced in Germany in 1934 in the face of National Socialism. It was written to show that resistance to National Socialism and the state-controlled German Lutheran Church was grounded in faith. The entire text is found in the sidebar in this section.
116. Jüngel: 188.
117. Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom and Rewards in Heaven*. University of America Press, 1997: 8.
118. Ibid.: 13.

119. Ibid.
120. Ibid.: 8.
121. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*. Vol. III: Chapters 40–66. William B. Eerdmans, 1972: 304.
122. Franz Delitzsch, *Isaiah*. William B. Eerdmans, rpt. 1983: 280.
123. Young: 304.
124. Ton: 14,15.
125. Young: 305.
126. Delitzsch: 280,281.
127. Ton: 14.
128. Ton: 15.
129. I am indebted to Siegert W. Becker for his helpful overview of Jeremiah in his paper to the Minnesota Teachers Conference, Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, in Sauk Rapids, Minnesota, October 23, 1958, entitled “Jeremiah, Symbol of Perseverance.” His paper helped spur me in a direction that I have followed in this section.
130. Becker: 6.
131. Ibid.: 7–9.
132. Ton: 27,30.
133. Ibid.: 32.
134. Ibid.: 36,37.

Chapter 2

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers From Prison*. SCM Press Ltd., 1953, 1971: 36.
2. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*. InterVarsity Press, 1986: 33.
3. Eli Wiesel, *Night*. trans. Stella Rodway. Bantam Books, 1982.
4. John Foxe, *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (various editions available).
5. Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror*. trans. Joseph F. Sohm. Herald Press, 1886.
6. For example, see www.persecution.net for up-to-date information on the persecution facing Christians today. Resources that can be obtained on this website include free subscriptions to printed newsletters, a weekly e-mail news service, country profiles, downloadable documents and reports, books, videos, and audio tapes.
7. Stott: 329.

8. Michael Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*. trans. Seraphim Rose. Saint Hermon of Alaska Brotherhood, 1984: 51; Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God, Systematic Theology: Volume One*. Prince Press, 1998: 4,17–52; Roderick T. Leupp, *Knowing the Name of God*. InterVarsity Press, 1996: 15–50.
9. G. R. Lewis, “The Impassibility of God,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. ed. Walter A. Elwell. Baker Book House, 1984: 553.
10. Stott: 330.
11. Wilhelm Michaelis, *παῖς* in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 5. ed. G. Friedrich and G. Kittel. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964–1976: 906,907; B. Gartner, “Suffer” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3. ed. Colin Brown. Zondervan Publishing House, 1975–1985: 719,720.
12. Stott: 330. See also Ignatius, “To the Ephesians” in *Early Christian Fathers*. trans. Cyril C. Richardson. Collier Books, 1970. “To Polycarp,” *Early Christian Fathers*. trans. Cyril C. Richardson. Collier Books, 1970. David Ray Griffen, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*. Westminster Press, 1976: 40,41; Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*. SCM Press, 1974: 227–231, 267–270.
13. Stott: 330; Lewis: 553.
14. See the helpful discussions by S. Paul Schilling, *God and Human Anguish*. Abingdon Press, 1977: 248–254; Robert D. Culver, “The Impassibility of God: Cyril of Alexandria to Moltmann.” *Christian Apologetics Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 1998.
15. Charles Ohlrich, *The Suffering God*. InterVarsity Press, 1982: 40,41.
16. Stott: 330.
17. Ohlrich: 57.
18. Dennis Ngien, “The God Who Suffers.” *Christianity Today*. February 3, 1997, Vol. 41, No. 2. <www.christianitytoday.com/ct/7t2/7t2038.html>.
19. Ibid.
20. Lewis: 553.
21. William Temple. *Christus Veritas*, cited by Stott: 330,331.
22. Ibid: 331.
23. Lewis: 553.
24. Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*. Fortress Press, 1984: 6.
25. Stott: 331.
26. Lewis: 553.
27. Fretheim: 7.

28. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, Vol. 1. Crossway Books, 1982: 99,100,332–337. See also J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*. InterVarsity Press, 1973: 136,153.
29. Pomazansky: 51 helpfully writes, “One must distinguish between the *comprehension* of God, which in essence is impossible, and the *knowledge* of Him, even though incomplete, of which the Apostle Paul says, *For now we see through a glass, darkly, and I know in part* (1 Corinthians 13:12). The degree of this knowledge depends upon the ability of man himself to know.” Eastern Orthodox theologians often distinguish between what one might call the “absolute” unknowability of God and the “relative” knowability of Him.
30. Fretheim: 8.
31. Ohlrich: 59.
32. E.g., Matthew 22:20; Acts 7:43; 17:29; Romans 1:23.
33. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains. Vol.1 Introduction & Domains*. United Bible Societies, 1988: 593 translates Hebrews 1:3a: “who is the reflection of his glory and the exact representation of his being.”
34. *Ibid.*: 592.
35. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Baker Book House, 1985: 840.
36. E.g., Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 5:19; 6:14; Luke 7:13.
37. John MacArthur, Jr., *Charismatic Chaos*. Zondervan Publishing House, 1992: 104.
38. Eamonn Bredin, *Rediscovering Jesus*. Twenty-third Publications, 1985: 99.
39. Erickson: 841.
40. *Ibid.*; see also D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Peter*. Moody Press, 1984: 176-180; E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*. Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1961: 180.
41. As reflected in translations such as the *New Revised Standard Version* and *New International Version*.
42. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Biggs. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford University, 1955: 318; William Gesenius, *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*. trans. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles. Baker Book House, 1857 rpt. 1979: 279,280; Carl Philip Weber, הַלְיָ; (hālâ) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 286,287.
43. Walter C. Kaiser, נָסָא׳ (nasa’) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 600.
44. Erickson: 839; Gesenius: 567.

45. Kaiser, אַסָּא (nasa'): 601; Delitzsch: 316,317; Derek Kidner, "Isaiah" in *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*. ed. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970: 618.
46. E.g., Isaiah 53:12.
47. Erickson: 839.
48. As reflected in the *New International Version*.
49. Stott: 244.
50. Erickson: 839.
51. John N. Oswalt, מַאֲכֹל (mak'ov) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 425.
52. Gesenius: 471.
53. Erickson: 839.
54. Ibid.
55. Brown, Driver, and Briggs: 687; R. D. Patterson, סָבַל (sabal) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 616.
56. Erickson: 838–840.
57. Gesenius: 578; Patterson: 616.
58. Erickson: 840.
59. Ibid.
60. D. A. Carson, *Matthew*. Expositor's Bible Commentary. Zondervan Publishing House, 1984: 205.
61. Ibid.
62. Erickson: 840. See also Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2d ed. rev., University of Chicago, 1979: 464–465; Harold K. Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*. Zondervan Publishing House, 1978: 246.
63. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker: 464; Louw and Nida: 270.
64. Erickson: 840.
65. Ibid.; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament. Vol. 1. Matthew and Mark*. Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1930: 67; A. B. Bruce, *Matthew*. The Expositor's Greek Testament. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1900, rpt. 1980: 141; MacArthur: 104.
66. Robertson: 67.
67. Ibid.

68. Erickson: 840.
69. Ibid.
70. E.g., Matthew 3:15—Isaiah 53; Matthew 8:17—Isaiah 53:4; Matthew 12:15–21—Isaiah 42:1–4; Matthew 27:57—Isaiah 53:11.
71. R. T. France, “Servant of Yahweh” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall. InterVarsity Press, 1992: 746.
72. R. T. France, *Matthew*. William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985: 159. See also France, “Servant of Yahweh”: 746.
73. See Romans 8:18–25; Revelation 7:16,17; 21:3,4.
74. See John 3:17; 5:30,36; 1 John 4:10; etc.
75. Ngien, “The God Who Suffers.”
76. While current Reformation theology typically maintains that our Lord, in crying out, “My God, my God...” indicated that, at that point, He was separated from God the Father, we must remember that Jesus is not only the perfect icon or image of God, but also of course God in human flesh, God incarnate. As He says to Philip in the Gospel according to St. John (14:9), “He that has seen Me, hath seen the Father.” In the following verses, Jesus emphasizes twice that “I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me.” Therefore, ontologically and logically one must ask how can one separate God from God? Oden, I believe, is correct when he suggests that Christ’s cry from the cross did not imply a literal abandonment of the Son by the Father. It is not as if, when Jesus was fixed on the wood of the cross, the omnipotence of the Father’s deity had gone away from Him. God’s and Man’s nature were so completely joined in Him that a union could not be destroyed by punishment or by death (Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life. Systematic Theology: Volume Two*. Prince Press, 1998: 333).
77. Charles Wesley, “And Can It Be That I Should Gain.” 1738.
78. Ohlrich: 89.
79. Stott: 335.
80. Ibid.: 335,336.
81. Ibid.: 336.
82. William Temple, *The Faith and Modern Thought*. Macmillan and Co., 1910: 168.
83. Gerstenberger and Schrage: 98–102.
84. Ibid.: 100.
85. Ibid.: 98,99.
86. Kazhoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* as cited by Stott: 332. See also Erickson: 297,298.

87. Fretheim: 123.
88. Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction*. Fleming H. Revell Co., 1978: 37.
89. Stott: 335.
90. *The Random House Dictionary*, Ballantine Books, 1978, 1980.
91. Stott: 335.
92. This is instructive to those in ministry who find themselves being pressured to develop programs and sermons geared toward “felt” needs of those whom they seek to serve. Sometimes a focus on “felt” needs may prevent us from addressing people’s “real” needs.
93. Arthur C. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method*. The Westminster Press, 1968: 64-82.
94. *Ibid.*: 72,73.
95. Quoted in Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-book of the History of Doctrines*. Baker Book House, 1952: 208,209.
96. Roderick T. Leupp, *Knowing the Name of God*. InterVarsity Press, 1996: 66.
97. Daniel L. Migliore, “The Trinity of Human Liberty.” *Theology Today* Vol. 36, No. 4, January 1980: 493.
98. Leupp: 76 writes, “The source and origin of the Godhead’s divinity is the Father, and the three are united in the giving and receiving of divinity, yet distinguishable in the precise way in which each Person gives or receives.”
99. God’s plan for restoring the world to Himself originates from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit—one plan carried forth triunely (see also Leupp: 95).
100. See Leupp: 93,94.
101. “Letter to Diognetus,” *Early Church Fathers*. Collier Books, 1970: 219. Quoted in McGill: 82. Cyril C. Richardson’ translation is equally compelling: “He willed to save men by persuasion, not by compulsion, for compulsion is not God’s way of working.”
102. McGill: 82.
103. See also McGill: 59–61. Migliore: 493 notes:

Nicene theology, defended especially by Athanasius, represented a completely different conception of God. The quality that constitutes the divinity of the God of the gospel is not absoluteness, incommunicability or invulnerability. The God of the gospel is defined in the act of self-giving love. What makes God worshipful is not the property of absoluteness but the act of being for others, the freedom to love. The biblical proclamation of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ, and decisively in his passion and death, requires us to understand the reality of God as open, vulnerable, self-giving love. This is the basic evangelical motive of the Nicene declaration that Jesus Christ is “one sub-

- stance” with the Father, that the Father from all eternity “begets” a Son, that the Father does not monopolize divine life but shares it eternally with another.
104. <www.worldevangelical.org/news_proselytism_28oct03.html>. This definition was drawn up specifically in response to accusations that Christians in religiously restrictive or hostile nations were involved in proselytism and hence were subject to hostile persecution by religious groups who assume that all evangelism must involve unworthy methods as a means of gaining recruits. Christians deny this, but the accusations of “proselytism” remain. We believe that it is important to distinguish between the two, even if religious opponents refuse to accept the distinction.
 105. Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*. Frank Cass and Company, 1968: 5.
 106. Additionally, the State has no business fulfilling a vocation of the Church and the Church has no business turning over its responsibility to the State. See Jüngel for an enlightening commentary on the fifth thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration which specifically concerns the relationship between the Church and the State.
 107. Bell: 4,5. Bell observes that the tragic evidence of this could be seen when Islam arrived in Syria and Egypt. The Islamic invaders found a divided Church, embittered and eager to triumph over fellow-Christians whom they regarded as heretics, with a native population who had, at best, a lukewarm attitude toward their “Christian” government that had tried alternately to cajole or to force them to accept a hated, western doctrine (the doctrine of the dual nature of Christ as accepted at the Council of Calcedon). Hence, the Muslim invaders, rather than being seen as a common enemy by the local Christians, were viewed by many as either protectors from persecution or instruments of punishment of “heretics” (Ibid.: 12).
 108. See Chapter 4, “3 John.” Two extremely good books on the subject of church discipline are: J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline*. Bethany House, 1985; John White and Ken Blue, *Healing the Wounded*. InterVarsity Press, 1985.
 109. Victor P. Hamilton, jm^{h} (māsah) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Vol. 1. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 530.
 110. Ibid.
 111. Ibid.: 531.
 112. Louw and Nida: 543.
 113. O. A. Piper, “Messiah” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986: 332,333.
 114. B. D. Chilton, “Rabbinic Traditions and Writings” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*. ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall. InterVarsity Press, 1992: 654.
 115. Ibid.: 656,657.

116. Ibid.: 654–656; C. A. Evans, “Midrash” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*. ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall. InterVarsity Press, 1992: 544–548.
117. B. D. Chilton, “Rabbinic Traditions and Writings”: 657; “Targums” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*: 800–804.
118. E.g., Psalms of Solomon, 2 Baruch, and possibly Sibyl 3.
119. O. A. Piper: 333 writes: “Modern attempts to reduce this multiplicity to one system do violence to the evidence.”
120. Ibid.
121. Glenn Miller, *Messianic Expectations in 1st Century Judaism—Documentation From Non-Christian Sources*. The Christian Think Tank, 1996: <www.christianthinktank.com/messiah.html>. I am indebted to Miller’s helpful accumulation and analysis of first-century Judaistic source material on his webpage.
122. Ibid.
123. See the following section “The Strategy of Jesus” for a discussion on Jesus’ instructions in verse 20.
124. This turning point is also evident in Mark (8:31). Luke places the shift in Jesus’ ministry toward Jerusalem shortly after the Transfiguration (9:51), but both the timing and the tone of His ministry changes in 9:18 with Luke’s parallel account of Matthew 14. James A. Penner in his unpublished thesis, *The Transfiguration in Matthew: A Redaction-Critical Study*, Providence Theological Seminary, 1993: 104, suggests a chiasmic pattern to the two major shifts in Matthew at 4:17 and 6:21 that are identified by Matthews’s phrase ἀπο τότε ἤρξατο οἰκῆσαι” (“From that time on Jesus”) as follows:

- A – 3:1–12 – John the Baptist testifies about the greatness of Jesus
- B – 3:13–17 – God’s testimony about Jesus
- C – 4:1–11 – Satan’s temptation of Jesus
- D – 4:12–16 – Going to Galilee to teach
- E – 4:17 – FROM THAT TIME ON JESUS...
- F – 4:18–22 – Establishment of disciples
- G – 4:23–25 – Positive response to miracles
- G¹ – 16:1–12 – Negative response to miracles
- F¹ – 16:13–20 – Establishment of the church
- E¹ – 16:21 – FROM THAT TIME ON JESUS...
- D¹ – 16:21 – Going to Jerusalem
- C¹ – 16:22–28 – Satan’s temptation through Peter
- B¹ – 17:1–9 – God’s testimony about Jesus
- A¹ – 17:10–13 – Jesus testifies about the suffering of John the Baptist

This fits well with Kingsbury’s three-part division of Matthew:

1. The Person of Jesus the Messiah (1:1—4:16)
2. The Proclamation of Jesus the Messiah (4:17—16:20)
3. The Suffering, Death and Resurrection of Jesus the Messiah (16:21—28:20)

(See also Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom*. Fortress Press, 1975: 9.)

Penner: 105 further notes that at each transition, there is a call for the disciples to carry out the same ministry as Jesus (to fish for men: 4:18–22; to suffer for the sake of the gospel (16:24–28).

125. I am indebted, in part, to Gene Edwards, *The Prisoner in the Third Cell*. Tyndale Publishers, 1991, for the way in which I have approached John the Baptist's view of Jesus.
126. W. L. Liefeld, "Transfiguration" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*. ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall. InterVarsity Press, 1992: 834.
127. *Ibid.*
128. James A. Penner, "Revelation and Discipleship in Matthew's Transfiguration Account." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (April–June 1995): 202; Penner, *The Transfiguration in Matthew: A Redaction-Critical Study*: 82. The temporal reference is likely to the six days in Exodus 24:16 prior to Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu going up the mountain to meet God and is included in Matthew's Gospel as a "literary link to the previous context as well as an illusion to Sinai" (Penner, *The Transfiguration in Matthew: A Redaction-Critical Study*: 35; see also Liefeld: 839).
129. *Ibid.*: 66.
130. *Ibid.*: 83.
131. E.g., Matthew 5:17; 7:12.
132. *Ibid.*: 205,206.
133. Penner, *The Transfiguration in Matthew: A Redaction-Critical Study*: 83,84. He does, however, admit earlier (*Ibid.*: 53) that the content of the discussion may not be completely missing in Matthew and Mark but alluded to in the discussion between Jesus and His disciples in 17:9.
134. Penner, "Revelation and Discipleship in Matthew's Transfiguration Account": 209.
135. See "Mark" later in this chapter for a discussion of the disciples in Mark's Gospel.
136. Liefeld: 834.
137. Adapted from Liefeld: 835.
138. Some manuscripts have "My Beloved."
139. Liefeld: 840.
140. E.g., Luke 19:11; 21:7.

141. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*. Oxford University Press, 2002: 217.
142. M. J. Wilkins, "Discipleship" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*. ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall. InterVarsity Press, 1992: 183.
143. *Ibid.*: 182,183.
144. It is notoriously difficult to know exactly how to translate *makarioi*. "Blessed," "happy," and "fortunate" are just three common ways of rendering the Greek noun. France, Guelich, and Gundry all hold that *makarioi* is best translated as a congratulatory statement. Gundry defines the term as "'to be congratulated' in a deeply religious sense with more emphasis on divine approval than on human happiness." France, *Matthew*: 108; Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount*. Word Books: 1982: 67; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982: 68.
145. Ton: 75,76.
146. See Matthew 17:12; 23:33–36; Mark 6:4; Luke 13:34.
147. Guelich: 108.
148. Ton: 77.
149. Primarily referring here to Hindu and Buddhist religious holidays.
150. Richard Wurmbrand, *In God's Underground*. Living Sacrifice Books, 1968: 265–270.
151. Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroad*, InterVarsity Press, 1993: 67,68.
152. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. 2*. trans. Henry Beveridge. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., rpt. 1983: 557.
153. Brett Webb-Mitchell, "Open House: The American Family in the Household of God." *Theology Today*. Vol. 52, No. 2, July 1995: 250.
154. See Rodney Clapp, "Is the Traditional Family Biblical?" *Christianity Today*, September 16, 1988: 25.
155. Craig I. Blomberg, *Matthew*. The New American Commentary. Broadman Press, 1992: 175.
156. I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*. Bethany Fellowship, 1969: 75.
157. *Ibid.*
158. Biblical faith, properly understood, is threefold: it involves knowledge (*notia*), assent (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia*).
159. Marshall: 75.
160. See John H. Redekop, *Christians and Civil Disobedience*. Background Paper for the Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. March 23, 2001.

161. It is interesting to note that all references to witness or witnessing in the book of Acts are public (1:8; 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39,41,43; 13:31; 14:3; 15:8; 16:2; 20:26; 22:15,18,20; 23:11; 26:16,22).
162. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*: 242.
163. See Ton: 79,80.
164. Refer to the preceding section “Peter (Matthew 16).”
165. L. W. Hurtado, *Jesus’ Death as Paradigmatic in the New Testament*. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Society for Systematic Theology, April 7–10, 2003: 2.
166. Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary of the Gospel of Luke*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957. Cited by Ton: 82.
167. Penner, *The Transfiguration in Matthew: A Redaction-Critical Study*: 105.
168. See the discussion by James Penner in the footnotes of the preceding section “Peter (Matthew 16).”
169. Seneca, *Epistle 101 to Lucius*.
170. Ton: 90.
171. See the discussion in Ton: 92, 409–419.
172. Ton: 100–103.
173. We will return to this theme repeatedly through the rest of the study, as it is a major New Testament theme.
174. Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God: Abridged Edition*. Longmans, Green and Co. 1932: 74.
175. *Ibid.*: 75,76.
176. See Ton: 418; David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1989: 114; Eta Linneman, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition*. SPCK, 1966: 81-88; David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972.
177. Ton: 418.
178. *Ibid.*
179. Church tradition tells us that John was not spared persecution. Some stories recount that he suffered, among other things, being doused with boiling oil but miraculously survived.
180. Ton: 105.
181. *Ibid.*: 106.
182. *Ibid.*
183. Walter F. Sullivan, “The Gospel of Mark.” *The Catholic Virginian*. January 17, 2003.

184. Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: Second Edition*. United Bible Societies, 1994: 102–106. Metzger notes:

The last twelve verses of the commonly received text of Mark are absent from the two oldest Greek manuscripts (a and B), from the Old Latin codex Bobiensis (it^k), the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript, about one hundred Armenian manuscripts, and the two oldest Georgian manuscripts (written A.D. 897 and A.D. 913). Clement of Alexandria and Origen show no knowledge of the existence of these verses; furthermore Eusebius and Jerome attest that the passage was absent from almost all Greek copies of Mark known to them. The original form of the Eusebian sections (drawn up by Ammonius) makes no provision for numbering sections of the text after 16:8. Not a few manuscripts that contain the passage have scribal notes stating that older Greek copies lack it, and in other witnesses the passage is marked with asterisks or obeli, the conventional signs used by copyists to indicate a spurious addition to a document. (pp. 102,103)

After examining the textual evidence for the four possible endings of Mark, he concludes: “On the basis of good external evidence and strong internal considerations it appears that the earliest ascertainable form of the Gospel of Mark ended with 16:8.” (p.104)

185. Robert C. Tannehill, “The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role.” *Journal of Religion* 57, 1977: 404.
186. This may be why Jesus instructed them not to tell anyone about Him after Peter’s confession in 8:29. Their lack of understanding would have made them inadequate messengers. Joseph B. Tyson writes: “It is not as if the disciples had discerned the nature of Jesus but are prohibited from broadcasting it, but it is that the disciples have a wrong conception about his nature.” *The Blindness of the Disciples in Mark*. Reprinted in *The Messianic Secret*, ed. Christopher Tuckett, Fortress, 1983: 36.
187. Tannehill: 400.
188. Ibid.: 402.
189. Ibid.: 403.
190. Ibid.: footnote 38.
191. This verb (αἴρῃ) is the same as in Jesus’ call to take up the cross and follow Him in 8:34.
192. Ibid.: 404,405.
193. Ibid.: 392,393.
194. Agustí Borrell, *The Good News of Peter’s Denial: A Narrative and Rhetorical Reading of Mark 14:54,66–72*. trans. Sean Conlon. University of South Florida International Studies in Formative Christianity and Judaism 7. Scholars Press, 1998: 80–82.
195. Ibid.
196. It is significant to note that following the reception of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, the disciples became changed men. Whereas previously they had been characterized by fear, now

they became bold witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is not to say that they did not still struggle with fear from time to time. Mark's desertion in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13) and Peter's withdrawal from the Gentiles because of fear (Galatians 2:11–14) stand as marked reminders of the disciple's continued need to choose obedience over disobedience, to live by faith rather than to allow fear to control their lives.

197. Wilkins: 185.
198. Wilkins: 185 notes, "For Luke, salvation itself is 'the way' (hē hodos), a pattern of life revealed by God" (see Luke 1:79; 3:4; 20:21; Acts 9:2; 18:25,26; 22:4; 24:14,22).
199. Scott Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations: The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*. Sheffield Academic Press, 1997: 178.
200. See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The International Greek Testament Commentary, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978: 252,253.
201. Cunningham: 179.
202. Ibid.
203. Ibid.: 179–185.
204. Cunningham: 180.
205. Ibid.: 182.
206. Cunningham: 184.
207. Ibid.
208. M. M. Thompson, "John, Gospel of" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*. ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall. InterVarsity Press, 1992: 372. Raymond S. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)*. The Anchor Bible. Doubleday and Company, 1970: 1055–1060.
209. Ibid.
210. Wilkins: 186.
211. Ton: 104.
212. This is the closest we have to a parallel to Tertullian's observation that "the blood of the martyrs is seed" (see Chapter 3, "Persecution in the Book of Acts"). It is important to note that Jesus is talking here of the disciples' actual deaths, not some sort of "death to self" or any other similar concept.
213. A. A. Trites, "Witness" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospel*. ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, I. Howard Marshall. InterVarsity Press, 1992: 879,880.
214. See A. A. Trites, *New Testament Concept of Witness*. Cambridge University Press, 1977: 114.

215. See John 3:35; 5:19,20,26; 6:57; 14:31; 15:10; 17:21–23.
216. Ton: 316.
217. Scott Grant, “Understanding Hatred.” Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, California, October 7, 1998 <<http://pbc.org/dp/grant/upper/upper08.html>>.

Chapter 3

1. Luke 24:16 indicates that the disciples were kept from recognizing Him and 24:31 speaks of their eyes being “opened.” No fault should be laid on the disciples for failing to recognize their Lord.
2. Steven Hawthorne, “Acts of Obedience” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader 3rd edition*. William Carey Library, 1999: 126.
3. Ibid.
4. Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom and Rewards in Heaven*. University of America Press, 1997: 315.
5. Ibid.
6. William Carl Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom*. University Press of America, 1981.
7. Thomas Schirmacher, *The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us All: Towards a Theology of Martyrdom*, zugleich Idea-Dokumentation 15/99 E. VKW, 2001: 31.
8. See Günther Bornkamm, “The Letter to the Romans As Paul’s Last Will and Testament” in *The Romans Debate*. ed. Karl P. Donfried. Augsburg Publishing House, 1977: 19. Bornkamm also makes the astute observation that Paul was obviously concerned that the Jewish Christians might not accept this collection, and such a demonstration of unity between Jew and Gentile in the church, and so he asks for the Roman church to pray that his service to the saints in Jerusalem would be acceptable to them (15:31).
9. Christopher Little, “Whatever Happened to the Apostle Paul?” *Mission Frontiers*, September 2001: 27.
10. This concept was first introduced to me by Vernon J. Sterk in his article “You Can Help the Persecuted Church,” *International Journal of Missionary Research*. January 1999: 15–18, as he discussed the growth of the Church in the Mexican state of Chiapas. His field research and doctrinal dissertation on the dynamics of persecution led him to conclude that 1) the acceptance of the gospel message leads to persecution, and 2) persecution negatively affects the growth of the Church. However, he notes, the damaging effects can be minimized through an adequate preparation for, and proper response to, persecution. He also notes that an essential part of that response must be the prayers and involvement of the worldwide Church. On a personal note, my research on the biblical theology of persecution and discipleship has been born out of a desire to help prepare the Church for and in persecution.

11. William White, ¹dr̄; (rādap) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Moody Press, 1980: 834.
12. G. Ebel, Diwk̄w in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2. ed. Colin Brown. Zondervan Publishing House, 1975–1985: 805,806.
13. R. Schippers, ql̄iyi~ in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2. ed. Colin Brown. Zondervan Publishing House, 1975–1985: 807–809.
14. Ryken, Wilmot, and Longman, “Persecution” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. InterVarsity Press, 1998: 635.
15. G. W. Bromiley, “Persecute; Persecution” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986: 771.
16. Adapted from Cunningham: 287–294.
17. See Luke 4:7,10,17,18; 5:28,40,41; 9:16; 15:26; 21:13; 26:9.
18. Cunningham: 291.
19. Ibid.: 291,292.
20. Ibid.: 294.
21. Adapted from Ton: 114–118.
22. Ibid.: 123.
23. Other places where Despota was used are Luke 2:29; 2 Timothy 2:21; and Jude 4.
24. Richard Wurmbrand, *In God’s Underground*. Living Sacrifice Books, 1968: 46.
25. Ton: 117,118.
26. Ton: 118.

Chapter 4

1. W. M. Ramsey, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1920: 230,231.
2. Ibid.: 231.
3. For example, 2 Thessalonians 2:7; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 6:12.
4. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 2. ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. T&T Clark, 1936–1969: 3–509.
5. The emphasis is on *what* the child of God will be and do rather than on *who* the individual will be.
6. Some might refer to 2 Thessalonians 2:13 as a proof text of individual election to salvation. The word used here for “elect” is not “eklectos” but “haireomai” used only in Hebrews 11:25 and Philippians 1:22. A derivative of this word is “haireisis,” which is used

more often in the New Testament to describe a group that is divided off from others. The meaning here then would be that God divided off those who believed, as a group, from those who did not (see Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1973: 145–148).

Another common verse referenced to prove individual election to salvation is Acts 13:48. The context is enlightening here. In verses 44–47, the Jews rejected the gospel. Paul announces that since they consider themselves “unworthy of eternal life,” he would now turn to the Gentiles. The Gentiles eagerly embrace the eternal life that the gospel offers. In the last half of verse 48 we read “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed” (kai episteusan osoi hsan tetagmenon eiv zwhn aiwnion). The word “appointed” (tetagmenon) is the perfect middle or passive participle of the verb *tASSW* (*tasso*), literally meaning “to place.” It was generally used as a military term, a) in the active voice: to deploy troops, to post officers, then metaphorically to order, to assign, to set in order to prescribe taxes, etc. b) in the middle voice: to fall into line, then metaphorically to agree upon, etc. c) in the passive voice: to be deployed/posted/appointed, then metaphorically to be prescribed, directed, etc. The verb never had the idea of being predestined, neither was it used to denote inner inclination. It always had to do with directives being issued or accepted or arrangements being made. *tASSW* occurs eight times in the New Testament:

- 1) Matthew 28:16—“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.” The Lord had **directed** them to meet Him there.
- 2) Luke 7:8—“For I too am a man **set** under authority...” The Roman officer had been directed to take charge of a company of soldiers.
- 3) Acts 15:2—“Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were **appointed** to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.” The church in Antioch directed them to take the matter to Jerusalem.
- 4) Acts 22:10—“And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is **appointed** for you to do.’” Paul was going to be given his directions.
- 5) Acts 28:23—“When they had **appointed** a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. . . .” They arranged the time when they would meet.
- 6) Romans 13:1—“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been **instituted** by God.” Civil authorities are authorized by God to regulate society for the benefit of its citizens.
- 7) 1 Corinthians 16:15—“They have **devoted** themselves to the service of the saints.” They had committed themselves to serving other Christians.

As *tASSW* essentially had to do with directives being issued or accepted, or arrangements being made, there is no reason why it should be different in the remaining verse, Acts 13:48. Thus, a better translation for this verse would seem to be: “as many as **were directed** to eternal life believed.” All the Gentiles present were directed to eternal life by

- Paul and they all believed. Paul turns from the Jews to the Gentiles and tells them that salvation is available to them. He directs them toward salvation that has been arranged for them by God. All they have to do is accept it (contra the Jews who rejected it). The Gentiles hearing this rejoiced, glorified God because of the “word of the Lord” given to them, and believed in the eternal life that they were being directed to. God is not mentioned nor necessarily implied as the one doing the directing. Rather it is Paul who directed the Gentiles toward eternal life through his preaching of the “word of the Lord.” This “word” spread throughout the region. Note: An alternate translation to “word of the Lord” in verses 48 and 49 could be “dictum” (this particular “ruling” from the Lord concerning the inclusion of the Gentiles).
7. G. MacDonald, “The Biblical Doctrine of Election” in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock. Zondervan Publishing House, 1989: 228.
 8. There are a few select verses that do refer to individuals as elect (Rufus in Romans 16:13; the believers in a select region in 1 Peter 1:1,2; the lady and her sister in 2 John; the angels in 1 Timothy 5:21). Otherwise, and prevalently, the elect are depicted in the New Testament as *community*, regarded as being chosen by God for special service and holiness (see Handley Dunelm, “Elect” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 2. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939: 924).
 9. Forster and Marston: 118. This is the crux of Paul’s argument in Romans 9—11 that elect Israel did not fulfill her calling, whereas the non-elect Gentiles are fulfilling the purposes of God by coming to Christ and thereby become part of the elect. The “loving” of Jacob and “hating” of Esau should be seen in this light. The election of Jacob is not to individual salvation but is an election to higher privileges and responsibilities as the head of Israel than those given to Esau and his descendants.
 10. MacDonald: 223.
 11. It is therefore unbiblical to refer to predestination or election as a mystery. Paul’s argument is that it is no longer such. See MacDonald: 215–219.
 12. Contra the idea that the physical, historic Israel are the chosen people, see Paul in Romans 9: “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring... only a remnant of them will be saved” (verses 6,7,27). In 11:23 Paul makes it quite clear that the Jews may be associated with the Abrahamic election only “if they do not continue in their unbelief” (see MacDonald: 218).
 13. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God*. SCM Press, 1953: 111 makes the important point: “Wherever the missionary character of the doctrine of election is forgotten; wherever it is forgotten that we are chosen in order to be sent; wherever the minds of believers are concerned more to probe backwards from their election in the reasons for it in the secret counsel of God than to press forwards from their election to the purpose of it, which is that they should be Christ’s ambassadors and witnesses to the ends of the earth;

whenever men think that the purpose of election is their own salvation rather than the salvation of the world; then God's people have betrayed their trust."

14. F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* Word Biblical Commentary. Word Publishers, 1982: 62.
15. Ton: 132,133.
16. Bruce: 200.
17. Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958: 16,17; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987: 2,3.
18. Stendahl: 57.
19. Ibid.
20. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: 4.
21. See 2 Corinthians 11:24–29. This accusation is more pronounced in 2 Corinthians than in 1 Corinthians.
22. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: 64.
23. Ranald Macaulay and Jerram Barrs, *Being Human*. InterVarsity Press, 1978: 151; Francis Schaeffer, *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer*, Vol. 3: 263.
24. Francis Schaeffer: 263; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: 96,97; Macaulay and Barrs: 152,153.
25. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: 68.
26. Michael Horton, *Corinthian Distractions: Paul's advice to the Corinthians just might be relevant for today's distracted church*. <www.modernreformation.org/mr93/marapr/mr9302distractions.html>.
27. To borrow a phrase from Francis Schaeffer. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*: 120 commenting on the entire paragraph of 1:18—2:16, makes the much needed observation:

This paragraph has endured a most unfortunate history of application in the church. Paul's own point has been almost totally lost in favor of an interpretation nearly 180 degrees the opposite of his intent. Almost every form of spiritual elitism, "deeper life" movement, and "second blessing" doctrine has appealed to this text. To receive the Spirit according to their special expression paves the way for people to know "deeper truths" about God. One special brand of this elitism surfaces among some who have pushed the possibilities of "faith" to the extreme, and regularly make a "special revelation" from the Spirit their final court of appeal. Other "lesser" brothers and sisters are simply living below their full privileges in Christ. Indeed, some advocates of this form of spirituality bid fair to repeat the Corinthian error in its totality. What is painful about so much of this is not simply the improper use of this passage, but that so often it is accompanied by

a toning down of the message of the cross. In fact one is hardpressed to hear the content of “God’s wisdom” ever expounded as the paradigm for truly Christian living.

Paul’s concern needs to be resurrected throughout the church. The gift of the Spirit does not lead to special status among believers; rather, it leads to special status vis-a-vis the world. But it should do so always in terms of the centrality of the message of our crucified/risen Savior. The Spirit should identify God’s people in such a way that their values and worldview are radically different from the wisdom of this age. They do know what God is about in Christ; they do live out the life of the future in the present age that is passing away; they are marked by the cross forever. As such they are the people of the Spirit, who stand in bold contrast to those who are merely human and do not understand the scandal of the cross. Being spiritual does not lead to elitism; it leads to a deeper understanding of God’s profound mystery-redemption through a crucified Messiah.

28. Stendahl: 47.
29. Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money*. Orbis Books, 1991: 121.
30. Ibid.
31. I owe this description to my esteemed colleague Paul Estabrooks of Open Doors International, who shared this in a sermon that I was privileged to hear in November 2002 at City Centre Baptist Church in Mississauga, Ontario.
32. I cannot understand the rationale of most commentators who want to spiritualize Paul’s claim of having to fight beasts in Ephesus. The context, it seems to me, leads to a literal translation. Admittedly, as a Roman citizen, Paul should have been exempt from such an experience, but as we saw in his beating in Philippi, Paul’s rights as a Roman citizen were not always upheld.
33. John Piper, *Desiring God*. Multnomah Books, 1996: 213,214.
34. Ton: 156.
35. Ibid: 155.
36. See Ton: 154,155; Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Vol. 2: Chapters 9–16. trans. A. Cusin. Clark, 1887: 388–390.
37. For example, see R. P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*. Word Books, 1986: 86.
38. Bill Green, *Suffering and Eschatology* <www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV11N1A3.asp>. In this brief study he also notes: “A careful study of the words used show Paul to be saying that even if physically he is crushed, even killed, yet God will never forsake him, and his ministry will bear the fruit that God desires.”
39. See Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians*. John Knox Press, 1987: 41,42; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1973: 139; et al.
40. Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1962: 443. See also 1 Timothy 1:20; 2 Timothy 4:14.

41. A. Plummer, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*. Cambridge University Press, 1903: 141.
42. Quoted by Hughes: 443,444.
43. Recounted in David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*. Regnery Publishing, 2003: 65,66.
44. Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*. InterVarsity Press, 2004: 13,14; William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. T. & T. Clark, 1902: xiii.
45. Sanday and Headlam: xiv; Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*. Routledge, 1988: 26–29.
46. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1—8*. Word Biblical Commentary. Word Books, 1988: xlvi.
47. *Ibid.*: xlviii.
48. Sordi: 26.
49. C. Tranquillus Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, trans. Alexander Thomson, R. Worthington, 1883: chap. 25.
50. Sordi: 26.
51. Osborne: 16.
52. Ted Byfield, ed. *The Christians: Their First Two Thousand Years Vol. 1: The Veil is Torn*. Christian Millennial History Project, 2002: 222.
53. *Ibid.*; Osborne: 408,409.
54. Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals. Book 9*. trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb. Random House, rpt. 1942: chap. 13.
55. Ted Byfield: 221,222; Sordi: 26,27.
56. Dunn: l.
57. Dunn: li.
58. Hence Paul's instructions in Romans 13:6,7.
59. Sordi: 28.
60. Sordi: 29.
61. This causes some consternation among those who, because they live in a country where there is no persecution, wonder, "How then shall we share in Christ's glory if we do not suffer for Him?" Perhaps George Whitefield's comment in his sermon "Persecution Every Christian's Lot" is helpful:

If it be objected against this doctrine (viz. that all who live godly in Christ will be persecuted, ed.), that we now live in a Christian world, and therefore must not expect such persecution as formerly; I answer, All are not Christians that are called so; and, till

the heart is changed, the enmity against God (which is the root of all persecution) remains: and consequently Christians, falsely so called, will persecute as well as others. I observed therefore, in the beginning of this discourse, that Paul mentions those that had a form of religion, as persons of whom Timothy had need be chiefly aware: for, as our Lord and his apostles were mostly persecuted by their countrymen the Jews, so we must expect the like usage from the Formalists of our own nation, the Pharisees, who seem to be religious. The most horrid and barbarous persecutions have been carried on by those who have called themselves Christians; witness the days of queen Mary; and the fines, banishments and imprisonments of the children of God in the last century, and the bitter, irreconcilable hatred that appears in thousands who call themselves Christians, even in the present days wherein we live.

Persons, who argue against persecution, are not sufficiently sensible of the bitter enmity of the heart of every unregenerate man against God. For my own part, I am so far from wondering that Christians are persecuted, that I wonder our streets do not run with the blood of the saints: was men's power equal to their wills, such a horrid spectacle would soon appear. But, Persecution is necessary in respect to the godly themselves. If we have not all manner of evil spoken of us, how can we know whether we seek only that honor which cometh from above? If we have no persecutors, how can our passive graces be kept in exercise? How can many Christian precepts be put into practice? How can we love; pray for; and do good to; those who despitefully use us? How can we overcome evil with good? In short, how can we know we love God better than life itself? Paul was sensible of all this, and therefore so positively and peremptorily asserts, that "all who live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution."

Not that I affirm, all are persecuted in a like degree. No: this would be contrary both to scripture and experience. But though all Christians are not really called to suffer every kind of persecution, yet all Christians are liable thereto: and notwithstanding some may live in more peaceful times of the church than others, yet all Christians, in all ages, will find by their own experience, that, whether they act in a private or public capacity, they must, in some degree or other, suffer persecution.

62. Ton: 168.
63. See 2 Corinthians 5:2 for a similar thought, again in the context of persecution.
64. J. Christiaan Beker, *Suffering and Hope*. Fortress Press, 1987: 77.
65. Sigmund von Birken, "Let Us Ever Walk With Jesus," *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*. trans. J. Adam Rimbach. Concordia Publishing House, 1942: 293.
66. Henry Lyte, "Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken," 1824, revised 1833.
67. Stendahl: 1.
68. This phrase "heavenly realms" occurs five times in Ephesians (1:3; 1:20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12). In 1:3, 2:6 (and possibly 1:20, 3:10) the reference is to the dwelling of God, while in 6:12 (and possibly 1:20, 3:10) the reference is to the sphere in which hostile powers are active. As we see in the book of Job, there is still interaction between the forces of good and evil

until the end of the age. Both God and Satan are seen as active in the heavenly realm. As it is difficult to determine exactly what 1:20 and 3:10 are referring to, it is possible that Paul is referring to the entire heavenly realm (consisting of both angels and fallen angels) which Christ was exalted above (1:20) and which is learning through the church the “manifold wisdom of God” (3:10) (i.e., that before creation, God predestined Himself to be mankind’s Savior and determined to choose all who accept His work in their behalf to become part of one Church made of those who would be like His Son and who would join Him in His plan to bring the blessings of this act to all people everywhere).

69. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary. Word Books, 1990: 192.
70. *uper umwn*, literally “for them.”
71. PHEME PERKINS, *Ephesians*. The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. XI. Abingdon Press, 2000: 458.
72. Ibid.
73. Lincoln: 456.
74. Tertullian in his *De Fuga in Persecutione* (written c. A.D. 208) makes reference to this passage as defense of his treatise that Christians are not to flee from persecution: “He (God) points out weapons, too, which persons who intend to run away would not require. And among these he notes the shield too, that ye may be able to quench the darts of the devil, when doubtless ye resist him, and sustain his assaults in their utmost force.”
75. Perkins: 460. Some would want to make these various terms teach a hierarchy among the demonic forces. Lincoln: 444-445 notes: “The writer has listed different groups of evil forces not for the sake of some schematic classification or completeness, but in order to bring home to the consciousness of his readers the variety and comprehensiveness of the power the enemy has at his disposal.”
76. Perkins: 460.
77. Jerome (*Epistle to the Ephesians* 3.6.13) offers the suggestion that a “simpler” interpretation sees this referring to coming persecution rather than to an end time day of evil. Perkins: 461 correctly notes: “The vagueness of the concluding clause, ‘having done everything, to stand firm,’ suggests that the author has an indefinite future in mind. The structures of the present age will continue for an unknown time.”
78. Lincoln: 457.
79. Ibid.: 450.
80. The term for “word” here is *rhma* (rhema). There is no distinct difference between the meaning of *rhma* and *logos* (logos) except that the former sometimes has more the meaning of “saying” and is included in the meaning of the latter. The differences were often more stylistic than linguistic or theological. By the first century, the words were virtually synonymous.

81. Paul has already pointed out in 1:15–23 and 3:14–21 that prayer was necessary for those who would receive divine power.
82. Perkins: 462; Lincoln: 454.
83. Ton: 187.
84. Ibid.: 186.
85. Ton: 191 (compare 2 Corinthians 5:15).
86. See McGill: 52–82 for a significant discussion on the topic of self-giving as intrinsic to the nature of the triune God.
87. Hurtado: 7 says, “Jesus’ self-humbling here is recounted to serve as paradigmatic, pointing in the direction of humility and servanthood that Christians are to take as the orientation for themselves, even if they cannot replicate the awesome degree of self-abnegation of their Lord.”
88. Moises Silva, *Philippians*. Baker Book House, 1992: 150.
89. F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1983: 88,89. See the section on 2 Timothy 4:6–18 later in this chapter for a fuller discussion of the sacrificial imagery used here.
90. See Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker: 220.
91. Ton: 184,185.
92. Ton: 184.
93. Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Fortress Press, 1976: 44.
94. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*. Fortress Press, 1971: 69 (footnote 10).
95. Compare 1 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10. The phrase also appears in 1 Peter in 1:11; 4:13; 5:1 and of believers in 5:9. The verb appears in Colossians 1:24 where Paul says that he rejoices in what was *suffered* for them.
96. Stendahl: 44.
97. Arthur P. Glasser, “Paul and the Missionary Task” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader 3rd edition*. William Carey Library, 1999: 134.
98. As in 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:1.
99. As in Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1.
100. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*. Fortress Press, 1971: 189.
101. Ibid.: 199.
102. Ibid.: 207.
103. The word for “you” here (uñin) is plural.

104. E.g., Athanasius, “Festal Letters” 9; Origen, “Homilies on Genesis” 8.8; Tertullian, “To the Martyrs” 3.3.
105. Ton: 221.
106. Sordi: 29.
107. Ibid.: 23–31.
108. Ibid.: 34.
109. Sordi: 34 notes:
- From the second letter to Timothy, it not only seems quite clear that arson was not among the charges brought against Paul, but also that Paul’s trial took place before any such accusations were brought against the Christians at all. On the eve of his second appearance before the imperial tribunal, Paul is only thinking of his previous experience and of the fact that the Christians of Rome had abandoned him on that occasion (2 Timothy 4:10; 14:16). The fact that he makes no reference to the far more dramatic outcome of the trials of the summer of 64, when a ‘multitudo ingens’ of Christians met their death for Christ, must surely mean that, when Paul was writing his second letter to Timothy, the massacre of 64 had not yet taken place.
110. Joh. Ed. Huther, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-book to the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*. H. A. W. Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament. trans. David Evans. Hendrickson Publishers, rpt. 1884: 209.
111. Ibid.
112. Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: Revised Edition*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. InterVarsity Press, 1990: 139,140.
113. Pauletta Otis, “Responding to Religious Violence: Love, Power, and a Strong Mind” in *The Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs*. Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 2004: 38,39.
114. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker: 802; Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*. Biblio Institute Press, 1981: 639; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. IV, The Epistles of Paul*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1931: 613.
115. Louw and Nida: 384; Ulrich Luck, *σφρονισμός* in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 7. ed. G. Friedrich and G. Kittel. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964–1976: 1104.
116. Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary. Hendrickson Publishers, 1988: 228.
117. Ralph Earle, *2 Timothy*. The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 11. Zondervan Publishing House, 1978: 398; Philip H. Towner, *1–2 Timothy, Titus*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. InterVarsity Press, 1994: 168.

118. E.g., Matthew 1:2; 4:18; 10:2; 12:46; 14:3; etc.
119. E.g., Matthew 5:47; 12:49,50; 18:15; 28:10; etc.
120. Romans 6:8 reads very similar to 2 Timothy 2:11, but the context is different. In Romans, the context is Christ's death for us and how we were joined with Him in His death. In 2 Timothy, the context is our dying for Him and how He is joined with us in that act.
121. I. Howard Marshall, *Kept By the Power of God*: 133.
122. See the discussion under "Mark" in Chapter 2.
123. Acts 14:8–20.
124. Ton: 225.
125. Ton: 231,232.
126. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*. Word Biblical Commentary. Word Books, 1991: cxxvii.
127. William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1985: 18.
128. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Vol. 2. trans. Thomas L. Kingsbury. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952: 310.
129. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment*: 154.
130. *Ibid.*: 155.
131. See 1:4 and 11:16 for similar comparative uses of *kreittwn*. Delitzsch: 281,282 makes the following insightful comment regarding the comparison in verse 35:
- But as great as was the faith of these mothers, and glorious its reward even in this life, there have been other mothers nobler than they who have rather seen their children die before their eyes than renounce their faith in God and His promises for the life to come.
132. Leon Morris, *Hebrews*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 12. Zondervan Publishing House, 1981: 131.
133. *Ibid.*: 133.
134. William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*. Word Biblical Commentary. Word Books, 1991: 417.
135. *Ibid.*: 418.
136. Delitzsch: 310.
137. See the section "Suffering as Discipline" in Chapter 2.
138. Hurtado: 8.
139. Ton: 427.
140. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*: 121.

141. Hebrews 5:7 is almost certainly speaking of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane where He asked for the cup to pass from Him but ended by committing Himself to the path of suffering that God had ordained Him to, to provide the means of salvation for all people.
142. Ton: 247.
143. Ibid.
144. A chiasm is to be noted in 10:32–34:
 A – you endured a hard struggle with sufferings . . . (v. 32,33a)
 B – you were partners with those so treated (v. 33b)
 B' – you had compassion with those in prison (v. 34a)
 A' – you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property . . . (v. 34b)
145. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*: 522 notes that the shift from the present tense of the imperative *mnhmoneuete* (remember) to the aorist tense of the verb *e|al|hsan* (they spoke) is “striking.”
146. E.g., Delitzsch; R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Tyndale: 1950; J. Moffat, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Hebrews*, International Critical Commentaries. T&T Clark, 1924; Gottlieb Lünemann, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. H. A. W. Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament. trans. Maurice J. Evans. Hendrickson Publishers, rpt. 1884.
147. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*: 522.
148. Hurtado: 8.
149. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*: 543 notes:
 As announced by Jesus, the call of discipleship is the call to martyrdom; the phrases “deny oneself” (but not Jesus!) and “take up his cross” are parallel. In the Synoptic tradition, the summons to discipleship is linked both with the concept of shame (Mark 8:34–38 par.) and with the severance of social ties (Matthew 10:37,38; Luke 14:26,27). The evangelists seem to have understood the requirements of self-denial as synonymous with the bearing of shame (Mark 8:34; Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23–26), just as they have linked cross bearing with confession (Mark 8:38 par.). The distinctive understanding of discipleship that comes to expression in v. 13 appears to be informed by this pre-Synoptic strand of the Jesus tradition . . .
150. Douglas J. Moo, *James*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985: 59; Louw and Nida: 332, 775.
151. Ibid.: 59,60. Joh. Ed. Huther, *The Epistle of James*. H. A. W. Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament. trans. Paton J. Gloag and Clarke H. Irwin. Hendrickson Publishers, rpt. 1884: 35,35.
152. See 1 Corinthians 1:26; Romans 15:26.
153. C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle of James*. Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1966: 88.

154. Moo: 93.
155. Ibid.
156. Mitten: 39,40.
157. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Temptation*. SCM Press, 1955: 33.
158. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Zondervan, 2002: 204.
159. Ibid.: 205.
160. Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*. Routledge, 1988: 23–31.
161. Ibid.: 32,33.
162. Ibid.: 33.
163. Barth L. Campbell, *Honor, Shame, and the Rhetoric of 1 Peter*. SBL Dissertation Series 160. Scholars Press, 1998: 27,28.
164. Ibid.: 28.
165. Ton: 261.
166. Ibid.: 262.
167. Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*. The Ante-Nicean Fathers. Vol. 4. ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. Ages Software, 1997: 49.
168. Ibid.
169. Edwin A. Blum, *1 Peter*. The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 12. Zondervan Publishing House, 1981: 240.
170. Fika J. van Rensburg and Steve Moyise, "Isaiah in 1 Peter 3:13–17: Applying intertextuality to the study of the Old Testament in the New." *Scriptura* 80, 2002: 280.
171. Ibid.: 282.
172. Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988: 152,153. Blum rightfully points out the word "Lord" in verse 15 corresponds with "Yahweh of Hosts" in Isaiah 8:13 (Blum: 240). This is one of the strongest references to the deity of Christ in Scripture.
173. van Rensburg and Moyise: 281.
174. Ibid.: 285.
175. Hiebert: 213.
176. Ibid.
177. Blum: 240.
178. "The moment you retaliate, your conscience is no longer clear" (van Rensburg and Moyise: 281).

179. Hiebert: 217.
180. Grudem: 151,154.
181. Ton: 265.
182. Selwyn: 221 suggests that it is possible that Peter is referring to actual burning of Christians.
183. Grudem: 65.
184. Ibid. This interpretation is strengthened by (though not dependent upon) seeing Peter's reference to his being a "witness of the sufferings of Christ" in 5:1 as referring to his being a co-witness with the church elders of Christ's suffering (i.e., he suffers, just as they do, for the sake of Jesus). See also Ton: 266.
185. It is interesting to note that, like Paul, Peter often links suffering and glory.
186. Grudem: 179.
187. E.g., Isaiah 10:12; Jeremiah 25:29; Ezekiel 9:6; Zechariah 13:7–9; Malachi 3:15. See also Blum: 249; Hiebert: 274.
188. Joh. Ed. Huther, *The First Epistle of Peter*. H. A. W. Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament. trans. Paton J. Gloag and Clarke H. Irwin. Hendrickson Publishers, rpt. 1884: 324.
189. Ibid.
190. Hiebert: 301.
191. It astonishes me how often I find believers who think that they need more of God or for God to give them more spiritual blessings or power in order to stand faithfully or walk obediently. This is quite contrary to Peter's teaching in this passage.
192. I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978: 4.
193. Ibid.: 190.
194. Ibid.
195. See Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals. Book 15*. trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb. Random House, rpt. 1942: 44.5. See also Sordi: 30–35; H. B. Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church*. Charles H. Kelley, 1906: 52ff,108–196.
196. This is the first and only example in Scripture of a situation where there was either only one leader of a church, or a leader who apparently occupied a position above the church elders.
197. A significant study on this issue is the short book by Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian*. InterVarsity Press, 1984. This book is also where I first read Evangeline Paterson's "Lament."

198. From Evangeline Paterson, *Deep Is the Rock*. Arthur H. Stockwell Limited, 1966.
199. In some regards, we truly do the book a grave injustice when we refer to it as the Revelation of *John*. It is, in fact, a revelation of Jesus Christ. Understanding that, we note yet again that, like Job, God replies to the suffering of God's people primarily with a revelation of Himself. God typically responds to the question "why?" with the answer "who."
200. Domitian was perhaps the emperor who first took his own alleged "deity" seriously and insisted on everyone acknowledging it.
201. A similar apologetic statement is made by Peter in Acts as he preached to the Sanhedrin, "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). It would appear that he was quoting Augustus Caesar, who had proclaimed in 17 B.C. that, "Salvation is to be found in none other save Augustus, and there is no other name given to men in which they can be saved." Peter in his sermon, however, substituted Jesus for Augustus. Peter was making a definitive point that Jesus is Lord of all, including (and especially) the state.
202. Workman: 100.
203. *Ibid.*: 99. The "genius" of the emperors to which their subjects were to swear allegiance and worship was a term used to refer to something between a soul and a guardian spirit that would guide a person or family throughout their life. The worship typically involved simply taking a pinch of incense and throwing it on a civic altar. A simple enough act, but to refuse to do was seen as insubordination, indicating contempt for the emperor. See also Ted Byfield, ed. *The Christians: Their First Two Thousand Years Vol. 2: A Pinch of Incense*. Christian Millennial History Project, 2002: 15,16.
204. Sordi: 35.
205. *Ibid.*: 43–53.
206. Hurtado: 11,12.
207. *Ibid.*
208. *Ibid.*
209. Ton: 290,291.
210. John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity*, Prentice-Hall Studies in Religion Series. Prentice-Hall, 1975.
211. The influence for this outline comes largely from Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Lion and the Lamb: The Gospel in Revelation*. Thomas Nelson, 1984.
212. Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1940: xlvii.
213. *Ibid.*: xlvi.
214. Ton: 295. See also the section "God as Self-Giver" in Chapter 2.

215. There are three times when God says, “It is finished”: at creation (Genesis 2:2), on the cross (John 19:30), and at the restoration of all things at the end of the age (Revelation 16:17).

The Persecuted Church

If you would like to know more about the persecution of Christians around the world, their courage and faith, and how you can stand together with them, please contact one of the following organizations.

Australia:

Voice of the Martyrs
P.O. Box 250
Lawson NSW 2783
Australia

Website: www.persecution.com.au
Email: thevoice@persecution.com.au

Canada:

Voice of the Martyrs, Inc.
P.O. Box 117
Port Credit
Mississauga, ON L5G 4L5
Canada

Website: www.persecution.net
Email: thevoice@persecution.net

New Zealand:

Voice of the Martyrs
P.O. Box 69158
Glendene, Auckland 1230
New Zealand

Website: www.persecution.co.nz
Email: thevoice@persecution.co.nz

South Africa:

Christian Mission International
P.O. Box 7157
1417 Primrose Hill
South Africa

Email: cmi@icon.co.za

United Kingdom:

Release International
P.O. Box 54
Orpington BR5 9RT
United Kingdom

Website: www.releaseinternational.org
Email: info@releaseinternational.org

United States of America:

The Voice of the Martyrs
P.O. Box 443
Bartlesville, OK 74005
USA

Website: www.persecution.com
Email: thevoice@persecution.com

