

PERSECUTION AS BELIEVERS' NORMAL LIFE!

Today's Text: 2 Tim. 3: 1-17

Extracts:

But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra- what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yes, and *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*. But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived. But *you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work [2 Tim. 3: 10-17]

An inspirational story has it that a pregnant deer was in labour on a remote grass field in a forest near a strong flowing river.¹ Dark clouds were gathering. Soon, lightning struck and started a fast-spreading fire. To her left was a hunter with his bow extended, pointing at her. To her right was a hungry lion approaching to pounce on her. Meanwhile, the labour pains got worse and more frequent. Then, unexpectedly, a lightning flash blinded the hunter at the time he released his arrow. The arrow missed the deer and struck the advancing lion. Rain followed and doused the spreading fire. The deer gave birth to a healthy fawn! What/who saved her? It was hardly by her own effort.

That deer did not offend all the forces arraigned against her but they all wanted her dead or consumed. She had what they all wanted and yet she could not help herself. So are those who have truly given their lives to Jesus Christ. In today's Bible verses, Paul reminded Timothy that those who desire to live godly in Christ will suffer persecution. It has nothing to do with offences they have committed against their persecutors; it has everything to do with their loyalty to Jesus. Do you find yourself there right now? How can you cope with such persecution as normal life? Today's study is for you!

¹ Story based on RJI's "THE PREGNANT DEER-such a beautiful story," Inspirational Quotes-Pictures-Motivational Thoughts, posted on August 20, 2015; <http://rishikajain.com/2015/08/20/the-pregnant-deer-such-a-beautiful-story/>

1. Background: Pain-avoidance is hardly an option for the true believer!

According to an African proverb, the hunter never tells his family members the challenges and ordeals he encounters in the forests each night, otherwise they will lose their appetite for his meats. But Paul is blunt to his mentee, Timothy, when he writes, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” [2 Tim. 3: 12]. *To faithfully follow Jesus is not about meat and drinks (prosperity gospel) but joy, peace and righteousness in the Holy Spirit (salvation gospel) [cf: Rom. 14: 17]. The latter is a hard road to travel, paved with persecution from known and unexpected quarters. Therefore, it is important for true believers in Christ Jesus to know who is behind it so that they can accept persecution as their normal way of life.*

Writing to Jewish believers struggling in the midst of persecution, Peter said, “Be sober, be vigilant; because *your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, *knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world*” [1 Pet. 5: 8-9]. Christ is the basis for the brotherhood between Jews and Gentiles. Why does Satan so hate and persecute true followers of Jesus? Let us begin from the beginning!

Jesus once told His disciples, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” [Lk 10: 18]. Satan, also known as Lucifer [Is. 14: 12], the Devil or the serpent of old [Rev. 12: 9], was originally the anointed cherub who held a privileged position before God [Ezek. 28: 13-14]. Pride consumed him and he rebelled against God. So, there was war in heaven. God’s loyal angels, led by archangel Michael, routed him and his evil angels and cast them out of heaven to the earth [Rev. 12: 7-9]. He found his way into the Garden of Eden in the form of a serpent where he tempted Adam and Eve, our first parents, to disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit [Gen. 3: 1-6]. For that, God cursed him, saying, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and *her Seed*; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel” [v. 15].

We know that a woman has an egg, not a seed which comes from the sperm of a man. Thousands of years later, when angel Gabriel came to announce to virgin Mary that she was going to be the mother of the Messiah, to be called Jesus, she replied, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” The angel replied, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God*” [Lk 1: 26-35]. *The Seed of the woman is thus Jesus Christ! Satan knew it and the battle lines were drawn.*

Look at Satan’s work just before Jesus was crucified. He was the one who instigated Peter to deny Jesus [Lk 22: 31-34]. It was the devil that put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus [Jn 13: 2]. Under Roman law, nobody could be judged without being given a fair hearing [Jn 7: 51]. It is called rule of

law. A rebel and murderer like Barabbas was merely thrown into prison [Lk 23: 19], but how about Jesus on whom there was no credible evidence? They arrested Him on Thursday night and by 9.00 am on Friday, He had already been crucified [Mk 15: 25]! How many law courts do you know that operate that way? However, the King of glory could not be caged [Ps. 24: 7-10]. Through His resurrection on the third day, He “disarmed principalities and powers [and] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” [Col. 2: 15]. But Satan knows no shame. Having failed to bruise the heel of Jesus who instead bruised Satan’s head, *the devil has now gone after those “who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ”* [Rev. 12: 17]. That is the source of the persecution that all true believers in Christ Jesus have had to face over time and that we also now have to face. Therefore, *our persecution is not from flesh and blood but from the devil and his wicked forces*. That is the point that Paul wants us to focus on as we examine the third chapter of his second letter to Timothy.

Let us pay attention to the following critical issues in Paul’s discourse:

a) *We do not have the time!*

Paul writes, “But know this, that in the last days, perilous times will come” [2 Tim. 3: 1]. Something is perilous if it is grave, grievous, hazardous, risky, threatening, unsafe or venturesome.² When such times come, as they already have today, Paul talks of men being “lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” [vv. 2-5].

We do not need to look far to know that we are indeed passing through perilous times. Around us, especially in developing countries, economic hardship steers us in the face as weak government institutions are abused by politicians and civil servants to corruptly enrich themselves and their cronies to the detriment of the people. Ethnic cleansing, religious persecution and massive refugee movements across continents steer us in the face on television or in the social media. *A new word has been added to Oxford Dictionaries in 2016. It is called “post-truth,” defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”*³ How can you preach salvation during such perilous times? Yet, we do not have the time since Christ can return any time from now with so much still to do to accomplish His great commission [Matt. 28: 19-20].

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perilous>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/16/post-truth-named-2016-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries/>

b) *We do not have many true leaders!*

Paul also talks of leaders who have a form of godliness but deny its power. They creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts. Paul warned Timothy, “Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all” [2 Tim. 3: 6-9]. In other words, we do not have many true leaders in our congregation, community or country to look up to for guidance and inspiration. We can only look on to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith [Heb. 12: 2].

c) *So, to follow Christ in truth is to face not avoid persecution!*

Paul prescribed that Timothy be the man of God by carefully following his doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions and afflictions which happened to him at Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. ***He was able to endure such persecutions because the Lord delivered him out of them all*** [2 Tim. 3: 10-11].

Recall some of the sufferings that Paul had to bear during his missionary journeys. For example, he received thirty-nine stripes from the Jews five times! Once he was stoned; three times he was beaten with rods and three times he was shipwrecked. On some of his journeys, he fell into perils of robbers, perils of the Gentiles, perils in the wilderness and perils among false brethren. How about frequent sleeplessness, hunger and thirst, cold and nakedness? Indeed, persecution is the true believer’s uniform [2 Cor. 11: 22-27]. The Faith Hall of Fame lists saints who endured trials of mockings and scourgings, chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawn in two, or wandered about in sheepskins- destitute, afflicted and tormented. Yet, they kept their faith to the end [Heb. 11: 33-39].

From the foregoing, it is obvious that ***persecution is unavoidable for those who profess to know and accept Christ Jesus in spirit and in truth- from the day of conversion and for the rest of their lives on earth***. What is then important is to learn to accept it as their normal life. What lessons can we learn from Paul’s message to Timothy to help us to see persecution as normal life?

2. Lessons for coping with persecution

To be a man/woman of God, you must live by the word of God. So, here are some useful tips to help you to build up your ability to cope with persecution:

a) *You can NEVER win on your own terms*

Paul writes, “Evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived” [2 Tim. 3: 13]. In other words, you can NEVER win on human terms, including your own. Jesus has said, “Without Me, you can do nothing” [Jn 15: 5]. How can you know that what you may be calling persecution is not a maturation process to prepare you for a higher responsibility? Why do you think that that hold up/delay in the traffic of your journey through life is not to prevent you from an unanticipated deadly accident ahead of you? How can you know that that promotion unexpectedly being denied you is to enable you to see a bigger opening elsewhere that the Lord is preparing for you? Therefore, you can NEVER win on your terms.

The word of God says to you, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” [Phil. 4: 6-7]. You are to trust in the Lord with all your heart always and never lean on your understanding. In ALL your ways, acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths [Prov. 3: 5-6].

b) Learn the basics from the Holy Scripture

Paul told Timothy, “From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Since *all Scripture is given by God’s inspiration, it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and for instruction in righteousness* [2 Tim. 3: 14-16]. It covers the entire field of your human experience.

Elsewhere, God told Joshua to never let the word of God [Book of the Law] depart from his mouth. He had to meditate on it day and night, that he might observe to do according to all that is written in it. That way, he would make his way prosperous and have good success, and the LORD would be with him wherever he went [Josh. 1: 8-9]. The Psalmist says to God, “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” [Ps. 119: 11]. His word is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path [v. 105]. Therefore, you must make the Holy Scripture as covered in the Holy Bible, your companion and guide book. The Holy Spirit will use the verses to speak to your circumstances from time to time [Jn 6: 63].

c) Then accept persecutions/challenges as your normal way of life

With full knowledge of who you are in the Lord, you are complete, “thoroughly equipped for every good work” [2 Tim. 3: 17]. For example, the same Peter that denied Jesus three times during His trial was the same one that stood boldly before the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council) to proclaim

His resurrection and salvation through His name [Acts 4: 1-12]. When Herod killed the Apostle James and put Peter in prison, hoping to execute him after Passover, Peter fell asleep in peace! It was the angel sent by God to rescue him that woke him up. In fact, he was in such a deep sleep that the angel “struck Peter on the side and raised him up ... and his chains fell off his hands” [Acts 12: 1-7].

What a blessed assurance your life becomes! Your earthly house (body) now means less because if it were to be destroyed today, you would have a building from God, “a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” [2 Cor. 5: 1]. As sojourners and pilgrims here on earth, you no longer need to be told to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul [1 Pet. 2: 11]. You will learn to walk by faith and no longer by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7]. That way, *you can face every kind of persecution that comes your way- from within and without. You can say with boldness, “The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” [Ps. 118: 6]. Persecution is now normal life to you.* That is Paul’s message for us all today.

3. Conclusion: Take up your cross daily and follow Jesus!

While still with His disciples, Jesus said to us (through them), “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. *He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it*” [Matt. 10: 37-39].

Therefore, let not your heart be troubled by the tough circumstances facing you right now- as long as you have accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour. It is only in Him that you can find peace. In the world, you can only find tribulation but He has assured us, “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” [Jn 16: 33]. Take up your cross daily and follow Jesus- in truth and in spirit. No matter what follows from there, accept it as normal!

Alleluia!