



gospel
&
culture

GOSPEL & CULTURE: PERSECUTION
WEEK 9 | PASTOR CURT MILLER

Gospel & Culture: Persecution

On Sunday, August 21, Pastor Curt Miller gave a talk on how the Gospel impacts our understanding of persecution. He worked through a number of questions and issues in consideration with this topic.

Introduction

For most of the world's Christians, persecution is becoming increasingly common and increasingly extreme. We in America may be tempted to believe we are somehow insulated from the global society operating around us; however, there is only one church, the global church. "We" are experiencing persecution because, as the Apostle Paul says, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it."

Persecution is God's wake up call to the global church.

Definitions

- Gospel: The good news that though our Holy Creator, God, has condemned us because of our rebellion, the person and work of Jesus alone makes a way for us to be reconciled to God. By turning from our sin and turning to Jesus in submission, God reorients us from a path of destruction to the path of life.
- Persecution: The persecution of Christians. This includes any hostility against Christians because of their faith in Jesus.
- Exclusions: People who have restricted religious liberty or are void of religious liberty altogether.

Potential Dangers to Avoid When Considering Persecution:

Complexity: We may be tempted to consider this discussion of persecution as too complex.

Distance: The reality of Christian persecution that ends in torture and death seems a world away. We are tempted to mentally draw lines in the sand so that we can define them and us.

Apathy: We may simply stop caring. "Compassion fatigue" is a term coined to describe feeling drained by all the people and things we must care for.

God is using persecution to wake us up.

The Current Realities of Persecution

What are the main causes of persecution?

Authors Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert and Nina Shea report the following three main causes of Christian persecution:

1. Communist and post-Communist Totalitarian Governments.
2. Religious privilege among some Hindus and Buddhists.
3. Radical Islam.

Every year, the Christian organization Open Doors puts together a list of the world's 50 worst perpetrators when it comes to the persecution of Christians. The top 3 countries on the list are North Korea, Iraq and Eritrea.

What the Bible Says About the Timeline of Persecution¹.

1. Persecution is a Historical Reality

a. How did we get here?

God created the world and called it good. No sin or evil was at work in the world. It was paradise.

Then, when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, sin entered the world and paradise was lost. The first brothers in existence, Cain and Abel, became the first persecutor and victim of persecution. For thousands of years God's people were persecuted.

The Psalmist and the Prophets describe those who hated and abused them. The Psalmist says, "Have mercy on me, O LORD; consider my trouble which I suffer of them that hate me, you that lift me up from the gates of death" (Psalm 9:13)

Then came the preeminent injustice of the world: The assault on and persecution of Jesus Christ was the worst thing that ever happened. It was the greatest injustice. But on the other hand, it was the best, because how else would we have been saved?

When you walk through history, you notice the gravestones of Christians leaders like Polycarp and John Huss who were burned at the stake. You see the mass graves of the large swaths of Christians imprisoned, tortured and ultimately killed by various Roman emperors and dictators during the last two millennia. You can visualize the stage on which Cyprian was beheaded by the Roman government."

2. Persecution is a Contemporary Reality

As you make it to the modern era you notice Jim Elliot and the Coptic Christians on the beach. Persecution Continues.

But let's examine some common questions:

a. *Who will suffer persecution?*

i. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that godliness may lead to persecution. "Yes, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

b. *Should we view persecution as normal or abnormal?*

i. According to the Apostle Peter, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you" (1 Peter 4:12)

c. *Is it God's will for me to suffer?*

i. Maybe. Peter writes, "For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" (1 Peter 3:17 ESV).

d. *How should we respond to persecution should we experience it?*

i. Jesus says in Matthew, "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 5:11-12 ESV)

e. *Is there any good that can come of persecution?*

f. Just as Joseph said of his situation, "20 As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people[a] should be kept alive, as they are today," we can consider that persecution may produce at least three positive byproducts.

g. Byproduct #1: Persecution produces virtue and purifies the church.

i. "Not only that, but 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 ESV)

ii. Suffering identifies the sufferer with the suffering of Christ (Phil. 3:10, 1 Peter 4:13) and gives the believer opportunity to remain faithful till the end.

iii. Sometimes we forget that the only thing more important than the human life is the glory, honor and praise of Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "32 Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. 33 But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 10:32-33). In this way, persecution produces virtue and purifies the church.

h. Byproduct # 2: Persecution strengthens the church.

i. Elam ministries reports 5 reasons why persecution hasn't stopped church growth:

1. Closing church buildings has backfired. House churches are impossible to contain.
2. Imprisoning Christians has backfired: Their witness increases.
3. Banning the Bible has backfired: More people want to read it.
4. Censoring TV and the internet has backfired: More people want to learn.
5. Targeting leaders has backfired: They've become examples to follow.

i. Byproduct # 3: Persecution brings Gospel Opportunities

i. It may seem counter intuitive but sources on the ground in the Middle East have told me that persecution of Christians and the violence of war has led many to turn away from the violence of extremists to pursue Christ. Many will say, "Well, if that's what my religion is all about, I don't want anything to do with it." As it's been said before, "Persecution has backfired and persecutors have become the church's greatest evangelists." So persecution is a historical reality, it's a contemporary reality but we also know that it will end.

3. In the Future, Persecution will End

a. Will persecution ever end?

i. According to Paul in 2 Thessalonians, "God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you" and "They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints..."

Biblical Response to Apathy

Hate vs. Love

The world says hate, but the Word says love.

- First, remember that you too were once an enemy of God.
- Second, we must allow God's word to lead us to repentance.
- Third, pray for the enemies of the church, who are really enemies of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 5 Jesus says, "But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'"

Security vs. Sacrifice

The world says security but the Word says sacrifice.

While wisdom is an extremely important issue to the Lord, God is more concerned for the nations to hear the good news and be saved, and for Jesus Christ to receive worship, than for me to be safe and secure.

- Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16).
- Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. – John 15:20

Action vs. Apathy

The world is apathetic to Christian persecution. But the Word of God calls us to action. Consider this guide:

- Awareness. Take steps to increase your awareness like you're doing here today. It's difficult to learn the extent of the problem by reading just one article.
 - Engagement
 - o Pray humbly for the global church.
- Open doors reports that persecuted believers most often ask that Christians in the West will pray that they be faithful, to pray that they would be bold for their Lord Jesus Christ, whatever may come

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15).

Ask the Lord to give them wisdom and grace to know whether to flee as Jesus told his disciples in Matthew 10:23, to seek deliverance as Paul mentions in 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2 or to be stay put.

Invest your time, energy and financial resources, to find an opportunity to serve the global church.

Sing to the Lord, All the Earth!

As we conclude, let's reflect on this verse:

Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. (Psalm 96:1-2)

It's been famously said, "Missions exists because worship does not." Worship of Jesus is our goal. Therefore, we care about missions.

College Church sent our first missionary out in the late 1800s, and since that time we have sent hundreds of career missionaries and over 1700 short termers because of our historical commitment to missions. These folks have served in some of most difficult places on earth to deliver the world with the gospel and love of Jesus Christ.

God is using the church to change the world, and Jesus receives more and more of the worship that he is due.

