

CHAPTER 20

PERSECUTION

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

Before reading further, consider how you would answer the question: What makes Christian persecution different from other forms of persecution?

The promise of persecution

Jesus warns His disciples – and us – that we will be persecuted.

John 15:20 Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also... (NIV)

What does He mean by this? And why do we have to go through something so unpleasant? Could God not protect us from it?

The promise of persecution is not something we want to hear, and it naturally raises questions. Yet we are warned it will come – if we are not experiencing it already. Knowing it will happen gives us an opportunity to prepare for it.

What is persecution?

Persecution is cruel, unfair, or systematic mistreatment of people over time. It is typically based on race, religion, or political belief. It can involve intimidation, harassment, ill-treatment, hostility, threats to life and freedom, imprisonment, and can even result in death.

For persecution to take place, it is usually approved or condoned by the state.

What persecution is not

Although individuals can suffer persecution, not every negative experience should be viewed in this way. Most people experience difficulties at work at one time or another. Relationship problems can arise for many reasons, and not all of them are connected to being a Christian. We need to be careful to avoid developing a persecution complex.

Persecution implies unjust suffering. You would not say a prisoner is being persecuted if they are serving a sentence for a crime they

committed. However, if that same person were imprisoned for sharing about Jesus Christ, then it would clearly be persecution.

Examples of persecution in the Bible

Examples where people fled from persecution:

- Obadiah hid 100 prophets from Jezebel (1 Kings 18:13)
- Elijah fled from Jezebel rather than confronting her (1 Kings 19:1–3)
- Peter fled to a secret place after escaping from prison (Acts 12:4ff)
- The disciples hid for fear of the Jews (John 20:19)
- Christians fled persecution from Saul but preached the word wherever they went (Acts 8:4)

Examples where people were not afraid of persecution:

- Daniel's three friends refused to bow to an idol (Daniel 3)
- Mordecai refused to bow to a man (Esther 3:1–5)
- Daniel prayed openly to God (Daniel 6:1–17)
- John the Baptist confronted a king about his sin (Mark 6:17–19)
- Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel boldly (Acts 14:1–7)
- Micaiah prophesied against Ahab, king of Israel (1 Kings 22)
- Stephen spoke up, knowing it would cost him his life (Acts 6–7)
- Paul wanted to address the angry crowd at Ephesus (Acts 19:28–31)
- Paul travelled to Jerusalem knowing he would be persecuted there (Acts 21:4)

The role of leaders

To understand persecution, we need to consider the role of national leaders. This is a subject we approach with some caution – God appoints leaders, and we want to avoid judging them or undermining their authority. However, both Scripture and history teach us much in this area.

Kings, queens, and national leaders wield enormous influence.

Proverbs 29:2 When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; But when a wicked man rules, the people groan (NKJV)

Their reigns can be precarious. Insurrection is a real threat, and if left unchecked it can plunge a nation into lawlessness. Leaders are therefore required to deal with threats to law and order, sometimes firmly and even by force.

The decisions leaders make have a direct impact on whether persecution flourishes under their rule. In practice, the ultimate ruler may not always be the true instigator. At times, individuals with significant influence drive persecution. For example, Haman persecuted the Jews during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Esther 3) and Herod persecuted the church to please the Jews (Acts 12:1–3).

Reasons for persecution

What motivates national leaders to encourage or condone persecution? There can be several factors:

- Fear – Pharaoh viewed Israel as a threat and ordered their mistreatment so they would diminish as a people (Exodus 1:8–22).
- Pride – God gave Nebuchadnezzar a great kingdom, but he became proud and credited his success to himself (Daniel 2:37; 4:30). He overlooked the fact that he was accountable to God and acted in a way as if he were a god himself (Daniel 3).
- Religion – Religious systems not rooted in truth and mercy can become cruel and vindictive. Some believe they are justified in dominating and forcing others to adopt their beliefs.

John 16:2 ...the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service (NKJV)

During the Crusades (11th to 13th centuries), Christian armies from Europe fought against Muslim and Jewish peoples in order

to defend fellow Christians and recover Jerusalem. Many believed they were doing God's will while committing acts of great violence.

- Hatred and revenge – The nation of Ammon oppressed Israel for eighteen years and justified their actions by claiming that Israel had wronged them in the past (Judges 10:8; 11:12–13).
- Racism – During World War Two, Adolf Hitler believed the Aryan race was superior and deserved preferential treatment. He identified certain people as non-Aryan and used this ideology to justify persecution – particularly of Jews, Roma, Slavic peoples, the disabled and Black people.

Scripture shows that no race can be inherently superior, as all share a common ancestor in Noah, who lived approximately 2350BC. God also does not show favouritism (Acts 10:34).

It is quite possible that many, if not all, of these motivations may be present at the same time in a particular period of persecution. One motivation that will never be present is *love*.

Persecution is never driven by love, but often by a mixture of fear, pride, ideology, hatred, and deception.

The role of citizens

Leaders require people to carry out persecution, and this is where citizens become involved.

Control of the population is essential. Selected groups may be given preferential treatment in order to enforce unpopular policies. They may be asked to perform tasks that others would feel uncomfortable doing. Leaders then use a mixture of rewards and threats to maintain discipline and order.

In times of trouble, when nations are threatened, people do things they would not normally consider doing – such as reporting suspicious activity, manufacturing weapons, or training for warfare. Standards of acceptable behaviour may shift from those held in peacetime.

As hostilities increase, hatred grows, and persecution of minority groups – initially at a low level – may be seen as necessary. However, persecution can escalate as tensions rise and consciences become hardened.

In 1961, Adolf Eichmann was charged with crimes against the Jewish people and crimes against humanity for his role in the deportation of Jews to the extermination camps during World War Two. His defence was that he was ‘a small cog in the state apparatus’ and lacked ability to defy instructions of his superiors, and it was the heads of the Nazi regime, rather than Eichmann, who were responsible for these crimes. The court rejected this defence, found him guilty, and sentenced him to death.¹

This verdict reinforces the responsibility of citizens for their own actions, even when compelled by their superiors.

How should we react when ordered to persecute someone?

The Bible teaches that we should submit ourselves to governing authorities and recognise them as people God has placed in power (Romans 13:1). However, this does not mean we should obey orders to do evil.

We are commanded to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44) and to do to others what we would want them to do to us (Matthew 7:12). We can refuse such orders, explain our concerns, and remain respectful toward the authorities. This may have short-term negative consequences, but more importantly, we will retain our integrity and our peace with God.

Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, observed that very few people spoke out against the atrocities committed against the Jews. He urged people to speak out if faced with similar situations, believing that if enough did, persecution might be stopped.²

While it may be impossible for one person to stop the persecution, at the very least, speaking out warns others not to commit the same sin.

Persecution for following Jesus

2 Timothy 3:12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (NIV)

In this Bible study, we want to concentrate on one particular type of persecution: persecution for being a Christian.

Jesus Himself was persecuted despite doing only good:

John 15:25... They hated Me without a cause (NKJV)

There was no righteous cause for rejecting Jesus, persecuting Him, or crucifying Him. Likewise, there are no righteous reasons for persecuting those who wholly follow Him.

- They do not fight, and therefore pose no threat to rulers (John 18:36)
- They consider others better than themselves (Philippians 2:3)
- They bring the hope of the gospel (Romans 10:13–15)
- They challenge bad behaviour in the hope that people turn to God (Luke 17:3; 1 Timothy 5:20)
- They pray for those who persecute them (Matthew 5:44)

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

Satan's role in stirring up persecution

As mentioned earlier in this study (see Chapter 2), everyone is involved in a vast spiritual conflict, whether they are aware of it or not. The devil seeks to exalt his own kingdom above God's. When believers do good and glorify God, the devil responds with opposition.

Persecution requires motivation, and this motivation must be based on lies, as there is no just reason to persecute Christians. Satan, the father of lies, is well placed to suggest false justifications.

His primary attack is against the truth that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father (John 14:6). When people cannot refute the gospel, they may resort to intimidation, coercion, threats, or violence. Satan also manufactures situations that portray Christians unfavourably, giving them a bad reputation which he can then exploit (Acts 14:1–2).

If he cannot persecute Christians directly, Satan will try to stir up persecution indirectly – for instance, widening persecution against a political opponent so that it includes Christians.

Satan's goals in persecution

Satan uses persecutors as instruments to fulfil his own goals, even though their motives may differ from his. He wants to diminish God's influence in the world and exalt his own kingdom. We can break down his goals as follows:

- To cause believers to deny their faith
- To stop the sharing of the gospel
- To target churches and gospel workers
- To discourage others from joining the church

Ultimately, Satan's aim in persecution is not merely to cause suffering, but to silence the gospel and weaken faith.

Knowing why persecution happens naturally raises a further question: how should believers prepare for it?

Preparing for persecution

In the lead-up to persecution, we will often see warning signs such as hostile rhetoric, growing intolerance, and a gradual removal of rights. We may pray for peace and seek change, but persecution may eventually become inevitable.

While we wait for persecution to come, an important question to consider is this: *how should we prepare for it?* Should we face it boldly, or hide for as long as possible? Perhaps if we hide long enough, it will go away.

Persecution can be incredibly severe, so not surprisingly, few will be ready for it, and many will need time to strengthen themselves so they can face it. Even our Lord Jesus Christ needed to pray earnestly to the Father on the night before His crucifixion.

In thinking this through, we need to balance our need – and the needs of those around us – for protection, with the need for the lost to hear the gospel. We should also consider the effect our actions will have on fellow believers. God can guide us in our response to persecution if we remain open to His leading.

Whatever approach we take, we need to overcome the fear of persecution – ideally before we have to face it. To do this, we must let go in our hearts of all that the world offers us, including our own lives.

Luke 14:33... any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple (NIV)

When we are called to give an account

Coming before the authorities is intimidating, and we will likely be asked all sorts of questions designed to provoke us and trap us. There may well be severe penalties for a wrong answer, so the pressure to give the ‘right’ answer will be significant. Jesus tells us not to worry about this beforehand, because He will help us.

Luke 21:12–15 But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. And so you will bear testimony to me. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you

words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. (NIV)

We will not know whether God will give us a favourable outcome, but we can trust Him whatever happens (Daniel 3:17).

The shame of appearing in court, and the fear of persecution, can be enough to cause people to desert those facing it. On one occasion, Paul had to face his accusers alone, because his friends were afraid to stand with him (2 Timothy 4:16).

If we have to give an account of our actions, we must be truthful and not lie. Lying would undermine our witness and our credibility.

We also need to trust God for the right words to say when asked about others. It is better for them to testify for themselves about their faith, rather than for us to speak on their behalf.

Above all, we must not give any assurance that we will stop sharing the gospel. That would severely undermine our witness and make us ineffective. Peter and John were severely threatened not to preach Jesus after healing a lame man. In reply, they respectfully told their persecutors that they would continue to preach. Later that evening, they asked God for boldness to continue sharing (Acts 4:18–29, see also Matthew 10:23).

Suffering punishment

In recent years, people have given accounts of enduring significant levels of persecution for their faith.³ When we first hear about their suffering, we may fear we will have to go through something similar ourselves and become discouraged. But we should continue to seek God. We can take heart from His promise to be with us, no matter what we face.

Hebrews 13:5...Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you (NIV)

We are told to endure persecution (Matthew 13:21), so it must be possible to do so. We can take confidence from those who have gone

before us and remained steadfast in their faith (2 Thessalonians 1:4). God will not allow us to be tried beyond what we can bear.

Hebrews 4:16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (NIV)

The disciples had to endure false accusations, injustice, mocking, ill-treatment, and much more besides. Paul gave this insight into what they experienced:

1 Corinthians 4:9 For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men (NKJV)

Our attitude to those persecuting us

We need to be very careful how we respond to our persecutors, and we must not allow hatred, resentment, and anger to build up in us in response to the hatred shown toward us. If we do, we give Satan ground to work in our lives. We need to keep soft hearts.

Matthew 5:44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you (NKJV)

The battles we face are spiritual ones with eternal consequences. God can use our prayers to open the eyes of our persecutors and enable them to see the truth.

Before Paul was saved, he greatly persecuted the church (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13, 23; Philippians 3:6) and was present when Stephen was martyred. Stephen's prayer for forgiveness for his persecutors resulted in Paul's conversion, and the church enjoyed a time of peace. Paul then went on to be used by God greatly.

We also need to be especially careful not to speak evil of the rulers of our nation (Acts 23:5). God appoints and removes kings, and He

can override their commands whenever He wishes (Daniel 5:21; Proverbs 21:1). Our default position should be to pray for our leaders, rather than seeking to undermine them (1 Timothy 2:1–4). We can also pray for justice (Luke 18:1–8).

Forgiveness

Christians react in different ways when persecuted. Many will cry out to God for vengeance. But a better response is to forgive our persecutors and earnestly ask God to forgive them, rather than asking Him to punish them.

In the midst of His suffering, Jesus prayed out loud:

Luke 23:34 Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do’ (NKJV)

Forgiveness does not mean we agree with, or condone, what our oppressors are doing – far from it. Our hope is that they may come to their senses, repent of their sins, and change their ways.

As we forgive our persecutors, we may also need to forgive anyone who has betrayed us, or anyone who avoided going through what we have had to endure.

The key is to put all these matters into God’s hands and trust Him to respond at the appropriate time.

Romans 12:19–21 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’, says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (NIV)

Avoiding persecution

Persecution can often be avoided with a simple confession: ‘I do not know Him’ (Matthew 26:72). Some will avoid persecution by denying

Christ, by sinning, by condoning sin in some way, or by refusing to share the gospel. The temptation to turn away from the faith can be very strong, and many will succumb to it (Matthew 13:21).

Although it may be an easy thing to do in the moment, it is something we must resist at all costs, because the implications are enormous. Our relationship with God begins with a simple confession of faith and loyalty. Denying Christ breaks that relationship and destroys our hope of eternal life. It is not something we can readily undo (Hebrews 6:4–6; 2 Peter 2:20–22).

The apostle Peter was initially unprepared for persecution. Under pressure, he denied Christ three times, but later he repented of his actions. He could do this because of Christ's intercession for him. Later, he became ready even to die for Christ.

Persecution against the church

Sometimes the church faces significant persecution – leaders may be threatened, teaching monitored, leaders replaced by state-appointed people, and meetings banned outright.

If, at all possible, we should continue to meet together:

Hebrews 10:25 not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing... (NIV)

The church is God's idea – not man's. Jesus said:

Matthew 16:18...I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (NIV)

It is His witness to the world, and therefore an obvious target for Satan. However, as hard as he tries, Satan is not able to overcome it.

End-times persecution

Shortly before Jesus was crucified, His disciples asked Him when He would return to the earth, and when all things would come to an end.

Jesus replied that there would come a time of great tribulation – wars and rumours of wars, famines, pestilences, earthquakes, and much persecution. Many will give up on their faith and will betray and hate one another. Wickedness will increase and love decrease. False messiahs and false prophets will arise. The gospel will be preached to the whole world (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21), and those who stand firm will be saved (Mark 13:13).

During this time, a man of lawlessness will rise up, proclaim himself to be God, and command everyone to worship him. He will have power to perform great signs and wonders to deceive people (2 Thessalonians 2:1–4). This man of lawlessness is also called the beast, but is more commonly known as the antichrist.

Revelation 13:5–8 And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, his tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (NKJV)

For a time, the antichrist will rule the world and will try to get everyone to worship him. Behind the scenes, the devil gives the antichrist his power, his throne, and great authority (Revelation 13:2), and he will receive worship through him. Many people will be martyred during the reign of the antichrist (Revelation 6:11).

Mark 13:19 For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be (NKJV)

Although we do not know when these things will happen, when a world leader emerges, we know it will be soon.

Persecution of the Jews

In this chapter we have concentrated on persecution of those who follow Jesus. Our study would be incomplete if we did not also consider the persecution of the Jews.

Israel is currently not following Christ, and they oppose the gospel when it is preached. God originally planned for them to be a light to the world, but they rejected Christ when He came to them, and that task has now fallen to the church. However, there is coming a time when God will restore Israel.

Romans 11:25–28 For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob; For this is My covenant with them, When I take away their sins.’ Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. (NKJV)

Satan knows God has a future plan for the Jews, and that it involves building His kingdom. Because of this, he considers Israel a threat to his own kingdom and seeks to destroy them whenever he can.

Conclusion

We need to make room in our theology for persecution – especially if we live in countries without a background of persecution. The Bible even suggests it should be normal.

1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of

Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy (NKJV)

Persecution can change us into better people if we let God have His way, and we are encouraged to rejoice when it comes.

Matthew 5:11–12 Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (NKJV)

It also brings Christians closer together. Particular beliefs that can divide churches become less important when facing adversity.

The key to coping with persecution is to look beyond this life to eternal life. Our present life is so short compared with eternity, and there are great rewards in heaven for us if we endure. Standing firm under persecution demonstrates our loyalty to God and our hope for the future. It confirms that we love God more than this world.

Romans 8:35–39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: 'For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.' Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (NKJV)

Questions to consider

1. Can we ever be prepared for persecution?
2. What things hold us back from enduring persecution?
3. How can we balance fellowship in church with putting people in danger of persecution?

References:

1. www.yadvashem.org. January 2026
2. jewishvirtuallibrary.org. January 2026
3. See for example, *Tortured for Christ* by Richard Wurmbrand, and *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom.

