

A Texan billionaire w/ a beautiful daughter loved having parties at his pool which was home to a 20 ft. great-white. Every night he'd issue a challenge: "½ my fortune or my daughter's hand in marriage to the man who swims across the pool!" He never had any takers. Then one PM, after the dare was issued, a tall, muscular guy hit the water. W/ arms churning he raced across the pool. Just as the shark was about to get him, he reached the wall safely. "Bravo!" cried the Texan, "That's the greatest act of courage I've ever seen; ½ my fortune is yours!" "No thanks," he replied. "Then, I'd be proud to call you son, you can marry daughter." "I don't want her either," he said. "What do want?" "I just want 5 min. w/ the guy who pushed me in the pool."

*This story begs the question* – how should a person respond when bad/difficult things happen to them?

As you know, the circumstances facing these early believers was beyond challenging – *it was life threatening*. During Nero's tyranny, he viciously used Christians as a convenient scapegoat for the trials of Rome and enjoyed using them for sport to entertain the masses. *So to profess one's faith was the equivalent of declaring your own death sentence*. It's in regard to such persecution Peter penned this epistle to exhort/encourage all believers for the sake of the Gospel.

As we pick back up after Easter, we find in Ch. 4 – Peter speaking to the issue of suffering/persecution w/ the intent to encourage believers to **GLOW** for the glory of God – *to be steadfast, immoveable abounding in the work of the Lord...*

When something **glows** it *emits* or *reflects* a steady radiance of light. It illuminates. It shines. It sparkles. As followers of Christ, we're called to **GLOW** – *especially when the going gets tough and hostility rises*. We're called to emit/reflect the steady radiance of Christ in us into the dark world around us.

*The persecution of believers is nothing new.* Believers have been subject to persecution since O.T. days – Joseph, Daniel, Shadrach/Meshach/Abednego? In the N.T. we see where Paul/Silas were thrown in jail for preaching Christ, but instead of licking their wounds, they worshipped. Or think about Stephen or any of the disciples. And NOW...

Some experts believe approx. 200 mil. believers worldwide face the continual threat of harassment, torture, and even death b/c of their faith in Jesus. It's believed more Christians were martyred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than in the previous 19 centuries combined – and persecution in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is off and running at a horrifying pace.

**Definition** – persecution is the unfair/abusive treatment of a person/group through physical/verbal assault for what they believe and for how they live their life.

*Beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes on you to test you – as if something strange were happening. But rejoice as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you're insulted for the name of Christ, you're blessed b/c the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or thief or evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian – let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in His name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins w/ us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*

**NOTE** – As the world becomes increasingly more hostile towards Christ, we need to understand that persecution is no longer what happens to missionaries overseas or Christians in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world – it now happening to all believers. Meaning – Peter's words are applicable today to believers all over the world. Yet somehow, I think in the U.S. church, we've embraced the delusion that Jesus has left us w/ a *prosperity* Gospel instead of a *persecution* Gospel.

But if we're honest, we like the idea that following Jesus means I never have to stand up for anything that might be uncomfortable or bring about negative experiences.

After all, the *American Dream Jesus* is buttoned up, successful, bountiful and the protector of most things religious. He doesn't do persecution or difficulty – but only blessings and bounty on the faithful... RIGHT?

But Peter is offering believers a different perspective. He's trying to wake us up to the truth – the world hates our Savior and will do anything to extinguish His influence. So he offers us (3) principles for when we encounter persecution.

## I Be REASONABLE

*Beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes on you to test you – as if something strange were happening...*

surprised – caught off guard or asleep at the wheel.

when (*hotan*) conveys the idea of at some point in time all Christians can expect persecution b/c Jesus offends the sinful. So it is not “if” but when – **so why would we ever be surprised by persecution?**

Every faithful believer will have some resistance/ridicule from the world – while others, for God's own purposes, will endure extreme suffering. *MacArthur*

*All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 2 Tm. 3:12*

Not only should we anticipate trials/sufferings, but we need to understand that God allows them to authenticate/grow our faith to express His love/grace to the lost world.

*Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, b/c you know the testing of your faith produces endurance.* James 1:2-4

God allows these moments to align us into intimacy w/ Him.

## II Be REJOICING

*But rejoice as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you're insulted for the name of Christ, you're blessed b/c the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer or thief or evildoer or as a meddler. Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian – let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in His name.*

rejoice – the word means to return to your joy. In this case, it means *to wear it as a badge of honor*. We're to rejoice b/c God is using our lives for His glory and the Gospel.

It is a very remarkable thing that the church of Christ persecuted has been the church of Christ PURE – while the church of Christ patronized has always been the church of Christ impure. *G. Campbell Morgan*

These verses remind me of what Jesus said in Matthew 5:11 – *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you...*

insults (*oneidizo*) to denounce/revile. It is more than casting insults, it's to reject/disparage by defamation of a person's beliefs and convictions. It is to mock them w/ words.

falsely speak (*yeudomai*) to deceive by lying – to seek to turn others against thru slander/conjecture. It's to openly attack to destroy another person – not just trying to discredit and disparage another person's beliefs, but to harm them.

persecute (*dioko*) to drive away by physical abuse, harassment, or unjust treatment. This is

The world knows of the Christians who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake; but these were kindly deaths. Nero wrapped the Christians in pitch and set them alight, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He sewed them into skins of wild animals and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death. They were tortured on the rack, scraped w/ forceps; seared w/ hot brass plates affixed to the tenderest parts of their bodies; eyes were torn out, body parts were cut off; their hands and feet were burned while cold water was poured over them to lengthen the agony. This isn't pleasant to think about, but these are the things we need to be prepared if we take a stand w/ Christ.

Peter says, instead of taking it personally, realize it's a compliment b/c the lost see Jesus in/thru your life. Instead, praise God and be even more bold b/c no matter how brutal the lost can be to you – it doesn't compare to what is going to happen to them if they never experience God's grace as you have. And it will like be thru your response to harsh treatment that the Gospel will find its way into their soul.

### III Be RESOLVED

*For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins w/ us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?” Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*

When facing persecution, you can **REACT** in the flesh or **RESPOND** in the Spirit. You can seek revenge, show resentment, or act self-righteous... OR

#### A WALK away from Evil

Sometimes, like w/ temptation, we need to look for the exit. Jesus knew when it was time to get out of a hot spot. In John 8, a mob wanted to stone Him to death, but He walked away. On another occasion Jesus knew the Pharisees were plotting to kill him, so He w/drew to another area (*see Mt. 12:14*).

## B GUARD against Compromise

The easiest way to avoid persecution is to live like the world. If you mimic the world you can be sure the world will not criticize you; although they might consider you a hypocrite and the reason they have to deny God.

*But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this w/ gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 1 Peter 3:13*

## C LOVE your Enemies

It's easy to think of ways to get even when someone has hurt us or those we love. We can be quick to begin to scheme our retaliation. Unfortunately, revenge is bitter sweet. We may feel better for a moment, but in the end it doesn't satisfy. God wants us to love our enemies and break the cycle of revenge. Instead of lashing out w/ anger, we're called by God to love those who mistreat us.

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace w/ everyone. Do not take*

*revenge, my 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 w/ good. Romans 12:17-21*

## D PRAY for Your Persecutors

**HURTING PEOPLE HURT OTHER PEOPLE.** They attack others in the same way they have been hurt. Likewise, many who may be the source of persecution are not believers; they are people who need Christ.

*You're familiar w/ the old law, 'Love your neighbor,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond w/ the energies of prayer. Mt. 5:43-44*

Prayer helps us to love the unlovable in our lives. Prayer changes people. Thus, we must love and pray for those who mistreat us b/c they're not our real enemy.

*For we're not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world... Ephesians 6:12*

## E Take a STAND

W/ boldness we have to stand in the face of persecution and declare the goodness of God in word and in deed.

I have seen in my North Africa brothers here a kind of faith of which I am not familiar. For (3) days now at hours-long meetings several times a day, the brothers have been taken before a huge group of Muslim leader's. They've been threatened and ridiculed. Still they have stood firm. Several have spoken up on behalf of their faith before over a hundred hostile people. One cried afterward for joy, saying that he had never spoken out before a crowd about anything. Today, he spoke before dozens w/ boldness and afterward acknowledged that it was only b/c of the H.S. that he could have done that. Another brother has said that as difficult as the trial has been, he hopes it could go on for 30 more days b/c of the opportunity it has given to proclaim the message before dozens of influential religious leaders. In all my life I have not experienced a more faith building and intense trial as this has been. It is still not over. But there is an incredible opportunity here to see the truth illuminate a very dark place. Please continue to pray for our Father's glory. **IMB**