



What Does the Bible Say about  
**PERSECUTION?**

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# WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PERSECUTION?

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# INTRODUCTION

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## WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT PERSECUTION?

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” – Matthew 5:10–12

### IN GENERAL

The Greek word for persecute, *dioko* (διώκω) literally means “to pursue, to put to flight, or to chase after.” In a positive sense, it can mean to eagerly pursue or seek after something—for example as in 1 Timothy 6:11, where we are to “pursue righteousness.”

However, in a negative sense it means to pursue with an intent to harm. Thus, by implication it means “to harass, to hunt down, to molest, or to cause trouble, to oppress”—hence, to persecute. In Matthew 23:34 we probably see both the literal meaning of “pursue” and also the extended meaning of “harm” when Jesus speaks of the Jewish rulers persecuting His followers from town to town. The word *dioko* occurs 45 times in the New Testament in one form or another.

Persecution and suffering is one of the themes that runs as an undercurrent throughout the scriptures. Entire books of the New Testament were written to those being persecuted: Hebrews, Philippians, and 1 Peter among them. Many of Paul’s letters were written from prison, where he was confined because of his gospel preaching: Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. John received the Revelation while banished to Patmos, essentially an island prison colony.

It is also important to remember that many of the most prominent Christians in the early church suffered great persecution and martyrdom. Stephen the deacon was the first. He was followed by James, the brother of John the Beloved. Church tradition says that all of the Twelve Apostles were martyred except for John, and their deaths were cruel and horribly painful. Other early church figures who were martyred include Mark, Barnabas, James (the Lord’s brother) and Paul.

# PERSECUTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

While this study primarily focuses on what the New Testament says about persecution, the Old Testament certainly also presents a number of examples of God's servants being pursued and mistreated because of their righteous stand for God (cf. Matthew 23:29–36). Here are a few instances:

## **JOB**

At first glance, this may not be obvious. But think about it a moment. First of all, the attack on Job came from the ultimate source of persecution—Satan himself. Secondly, Job suffered as a righteous man. Yet his friends continually harassed him and accused him of being wicked and deserving of his suffering.

## **JOSEPH**

He was thrown into a well, sold into slavery, and imprisoned as a result of revealing a vision that God had given to him.

## **DAVID**

King Saul pursued him, threatened his life, and on several occasions tried to kill him out of jealousy, and as a result of God's choosing David to be the next anointed king.

## **ELIJAH**

Both Ahab and Jezebel threatened his life and pursued him, all because he exposed their sinfulness and proclaimed the word of God (e.g., 1 Kings 19:1–3).

## **MICAIAH**

This prophet declared to the kings of Israel and Judah the word of the Lord, and was then arrested and imprisoned for it (1 Kings 22).

## **HANANI**

He prophesied to King Asa and was imprisoned for it (2 Chronicles 16:7–10).

## **ZECHARIAH, SON OF JEHOIADA**

For prophesying about the sin of Judah he was attacked in the Temple courtyard and stoned to death (2 Chronicles 24:17–22).

## **URIAH**

During the time of Jeremiah there was a prophet who spoke the word of the Lord against Jehoiakim, king of Judah. The king threatened his life, so he fled to Egypt. Jehoiakim had him captured and brought back to Jerusalem, where he was executed (Jeremiah 26:20–23).

## **JEREMIAH**

For declaring the word of God to the kings of Judah, Jeremiah suffered repeated persecution. He was often rejected, reviled, and maligned. He was publicly humiliated. He was beaten and then put in stocks (Jeremiah 20:1–2). He was imprisoned (chapter 32). He was beaten and thrown into a cistern (chapter 37). He was falsely accused and then cast into a dungeon (cistern), to languish in the mud (chapter 38). He was later bound in chains (40:1).

And finally...

## **JOHN THE BAPTIST**

John served as a bridge between the Old Testament prophetic tradition and the coming New Covenant of the Messiah. For exposing the sin of King Herod, he was imprisoned and then beheaded (Matthew 14:3–12).



# WHY ARE BELIEVERS PERSECUTED?

## THE WORD

Persecution often results from the proclamation of the word of God. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus comments that “persecution comes because of the word” (Matthew 13:21; cf. John 8:37). We see this in the Old Testament when the prophets of God suffered because of their declaration of truth against sinful people (“Persecution in the Old Testament” above).

Stephen faced a similar situation in the New Testament. He confronted the Jewish rulers with their rejection of the Messiah. In Acts 7 we see his bold proclamation of truth, revealing the sinful, rebellious hearts of those listening. Stephen’s audience did not want to hear the prophetic truth he proclaimed. They even covered their ears to block the sound of his voice (Acts 7:57). The immediate result was the stoning of Stephen himself, the first Christian martyr (Acts 7:57–58). However, a general persecution against the church also arose following Stephen’s confrontation with the Jewish rulers and his consequent martyrdom (Acts 8:1; 11:19).

One aspect of the gospel that may especially result in persecution is the preaching of the cross. That is to say, to declare that salvation is only found through the atoning work of Christ is offensive to some. For example, Paul notes that there were some

in Galatia who said that Christians must follow the Mosaic Law, specifically circumcision, because they were afraid of being persecuted “for the cross” (Galatians 6:12). In other words, to affirm that the cross was the only means of salvation could result in their suffering at the hands of the so-called Judaizers. The threat of such persecution was genuine (for example, see 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16), and these Galatians were willing to compromise the truth in order to avoid it.

## THE NAME

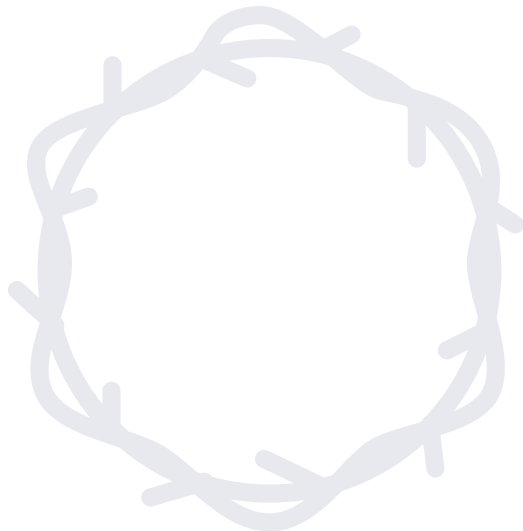
Believers may also suffer persecution because of their identification with the person of Christ Himself. For example, in Acts 5:41 the Apostles rejoiced because they were “counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”

Jesus predicted in the latter times that people would hate His followers simply because they belonged to Him: “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me” (Matthew 24:9).

When God sent Ananias to minister to the newly converted Paul, he was told that Paul would learn “how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:16).

## THE DIFFERENCE

The Bible teaches that Christians are persecuted because we are not of this world. Our values, behavior, thinking, perspectives, and lifestyle all mark us as different (cf. 1 John 4:4–6). And this difference causes animosity, and even hatred, on the part of the people of this world. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18–19 ESV; also see 1 Peter 4:3–4).





# PERSECUTION IS COMMON

In the West, especially in the United States, we have lived for many generations in societies where persecution of Christians is unknown, or at least rare. Our Judeo-Christian heritage, along with democratic ideals of freedom of religion, have provided us with a climate that fosters religious tolerance and liberty. We have forgotten that this has not always been the case, even in Western civilization. Nor is it the case in many societies around the world, currently or historically.

However, when we carefully read the scriptures, it becomes clear that persecution is not unusual for the church. Indeed, Paul affirms, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). The writer to the Hebrews stated that believers were commonly afflicted, or were at least companions of those who were (Hebrews 10:33).

God even prophesied that His prophets and servants would be persecuted (Luke 11:48–50). Jesus uttered a similar prophecy in Luke 21:12 regarding his followers. Jesus plainly taught that those He sends out with the message of the gospel can expect persecution (Matthew 10:16–26).

The writer to the Hebrews informs us that suffering in service to the Lord was a common occurrence for the prophets of old. In Hebrews 11:35–38 he catalogs the afflictions of those who “were

tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them.”

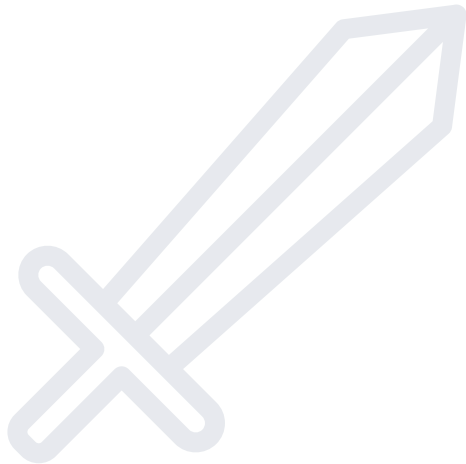
Peter taught believers to expect persecution: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).

We should not be surprised if we are persecuted, for even Jesus Himself was persecuted by those who opposed Him (John 5:16). Jesus often spoke of His experiencing suffering, abuse, and rejections (e.g., Matthew 16:21; 17:12; Mark 9:12; Luke 17:25). And if our Lord was persecuted, can we expect to escape persecution? Indeed no. Jesus stated clearly, “Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20).

# FORMS OF PERSECUTION

The New Testament describes a wide variety of ways in which Christians suffer for their faith:

- They are publicly insulted and humiliated (Hebrews 10:33).
- Evil things are said about them (Matthew 5:11).
- They are defamed as “evildoers” (1 Peter 3:14).
- They are betrayed, even by family (Matthew 10:21).
- They are brought to interrogation and trial (Matthew 10:17–20).
- Restrictions are placed upon their ministry (Acts 5:28; 5:40).
- They are forced to flee (Acts 8:1; 11:19).
- They are arrested and imprisoned (Acts 4:3–22; 5:17–42; 16:23ff, etc.).
- They are flogged (Acts 5:40; 16:23; 2 Corinthians 11:24).
- They are stoned (Acts 14:19).
- They are hated by the people of the world (Matthew 10:22; 24:9).
- They are killed (Acts 7:57–60; 12:1–5).



# HOW DO THE PERSECUTED RESPOND?

## AS HOPEFUL WITNESSES

God uses persecution as a testimony to the power of the gospel message. We must remember that our word “martyr” is actually derived from the Greek word *martus* ( μάρτυς ) which means “witness.” The early church applied this term to those who suffered and died for their faith because their deaths were such a powerful testimony for the gospel.

The history of the church is replete with accounts of how the suffering of believers stirred unbelieving bystanders to commit their lives to Christ. There are accounts of Christians being thrown to the lions, or burned at the stake, and their peaceful demeanor, courage and even joy at facing death for Christ so moved those watching that some became believers immediately.

In the midst of persecution, Christians have embodied a testimony to the word of God and the gospel. They have been fearless and unmoved (Matthew 10:28; Acts 20:24; Revelation 12:11), unashamed (1 Peter 4:16), refusing to deny the truth (Revelation 2:13).

## ENDURING THE PERSECUTION

Sometimes the Christian manifests trust in God by simply enduring the persecution: “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it” (1 Corinthians 4:12). The word “endure” here means “to bear with, to hold up under, to tolerate.” The Christian does not retaliate, but neither does he bow. He puts up with the suffering in humility and returns love for hate, yet stays true to his faith and his Lord. As Paul says elsewhere, when persecuted we are “struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:9). We endure (James 5:10–11).

## MOVING ON

However, to stay and suffer persecution is not always God’s. Sometimes flight is required (Matthew 10:23). It is not lack of spirituality or cowardice to flee from persecution. It is common sense. When persecution begins, it sometimes may be prudent to simply move to another place where the gospel might be more readily received. This was certainly the case in the ministry of the Apostle Paul (e.g., Acts 14:5–7).

## **LOOKING UP**

A lesson that persecution teaches us is that our life does not consist of the things of this world—not its comforts, luxuries, benefits, or acceptance. We are citizens of a different realm. We look for another land, our true home. And the glories and blessedness of that land will eclipse any persecution, hardship, or suffering we may experience in this life. That is why Hebrews says, “You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions” (10:34). That is also why Paul said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

## **LOVING THE PERSECUTORS**

Jesus taught us that when persecuted, we should love our enemies, and pray for those who are persecuting us (Matthew 5:44). Paul echoes the same sentiment when he commands, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14).

## **ACCEPTING GOD’S LOVE**

It must be understood that persecution is not a sign of divine displeasure. It is not punishment. To the contrary, to suffer for Christ may be viewed as an honor that God bestows on His people (see Acts 5:41). Further, it does not indicate a lack of fellowship with God in anyway. For as Paul asserts, persecution cannot separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:35). Indeed, our status is that we are “persecuted, but not forsaken” (2 Corinthians 4:9).

## **COMING TOGETHER**

Persecution often unites the church. Fellow sufferers come together to console, encourage, and strengthen one another. Those who are not currently suffering still may compassionately and empathetically share in the afflictions of others in the body: “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Hebrews 13:3). As believers we are commanded to “rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15; see also 1 Corinthians 12:26).

## TRUSTING GOD

In the midst of persecution, we must keep in mind that God loves us, and He is in control. We have confidence in Him, even when we are suffering. Writing to a persecuted body of believers, Peter wrote, “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (1 Peter 4:19). Paul learned to have such trust in the sufficiency of grace that he could “delight...in persecutions” (2 Corinthians 12:10). It is not that the suffering is pleasant. Of course it is not. It is simply that God’s grace is completely sufficient, even in hardship, even in persecution.

In Revelation 6 we see a great company of martyrs in heaven. As they cry out to God, they wonder how long His justice will wait. They are told “to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been” (Revelation 6:11). This indicates to us that God is not only aware of the suffering of His servants, but He is also sovereignly overseeing what happens to them. He has even appointed a limit to the number who will be killed for their faith. When this number is completed, God will exact righteous justice toward those who have persecuted and killed the saints. The point to be made here is that all of our experiences, including suffering and persecution, are in the hands of a faithful, loving, sovereign God.

# GOD PERMITS PERSECUTION FOR THE PURPOSE OF...

## FELLOWSHIP

Suffering allows the believer to enter into an intimate fellowship with the Lord, who Himself suffered for us. This is one of those truths that seem odd to our modern way of thinking. Yet for the Christian there is a communion with Christ that occurs no other way. Paul even expressed a desire to know Christ in this way, in His suffering as well as His glory: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10). Note Colossians 1:24 and Romans 8:17 in this regard.

## WITNESS

As previously noted, one of the primary reasons that God allows persecution is that it serves as a witness to the gospel. That believers are willing to suffer, even to die, for their faith is a powerful demonstration of the reality of Christ’s presence in their lives.

Paul often speaks of the great suffering he has endured for the Lord. He asserts, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body” (2 Corinthians 4:8–10). Take note of what

he says in verse 10. He bears in his body the “death of Jesus.” In other words, he constantly suffers in a way that is similar to the death of Christ, always facing the reality of death for his faith. Paul declares that he even bears in his own body the marks of his suffering for Christ (Galatians 6:17). And these marks of death, borne for his Savior, are a manifestation of the life of Jesus. His very suffering is a sign of the life of Christ in him, and is a testimony to the world of the reality of the gospel.

Again, Paul sees his sufferings for the sake of the gospel as not only advancing the gospel, but completing the work that Christ initiated (see Colossians 1:24).

## BLESSING

There is a blessing for those who are persecuted (Matthew 5:10). This may seem incongruous to us. We do not equate suffering and hardship with blessing. But we must remember that God’s kingdom operates on different rules and principles than our natural order of things. (See also 1 Peter 3:14 and 4:14.)

Another example of this is seen in Philippians, where Paul indicates that suffering can actually be a gift from God—“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him” (Philippians 1:29). Notice that to

suffer for Christ is a “grace” from the Lord; a privilege He bestows on believers (cf. Acts 5:41). (The word “granted” here means “to give freely, to show favor, to graciously bestow.”)

## **DEMONSTRATION OF JUSTICE**

There is coming a day when the God the Righteous Judge will make all things right. He will put down evil and establish equity and justice for all people. In that day, God will exact justice on those who have afflicted His people. This is not a concept that is commonly taught in today’s culture. But it is a biblical concept. Consider Paul’s words of encouragement to the Thessalonian church. He speaks of their suffering and says to them that “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you” (2 Thessalonians 1:6). In Revelation 6 we see the souls of those who have been martyred for their faith in heaven. They cry out to God for justice for those who had persecuted them. The answer they receive indicates both the justice and sovereignty of God in the matter:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been (Revelation 6:9–11).

## **TO GLORIFY GOD**

This not an idea that we may want to hear—but the scriptures are clear. Persecution and suffering on the part of the saints of God can be an instrument to bring glory to God. Consider the words of 1 Peter 4:12–16, written to persecuted Christians:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

## **TO GLORIFY SAINTS**

Suffering is a prerequisite to glory. The may sound strange to our ears, but it is clearly indicated in the scriptures. We see this in the life of Christ (Luke 24:46; Hebrews 2:9; 1 Peter 1:11). Paul expresses a similar sentiment in Romans when he says that if we are children of God we are “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:17). Note that the suffering not only comes before the glory; the suffering results in the glory.

## TO REWARD

God prepares a reward for the persecuted (Matthew 5:12). Hebrews lets us know that those who suffer for the Lord will “obtain a better resurrection” (Hebrews 11:35). In fact, one of the promised crowns given in heaven is the crown of life, given to those who suffer for Christ (see Revelation 2:10). We must recall that the Bible says that if we endure the afflictions of this life, then we shall reign with Him (2 Timothy 2:12).





# CONCLUSION: PERSECUTION OF CHRIST'S BODY

When Saul of Tarsus was confronted with the living Christ on the road to Damascus, Jesus asked him a very telling question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul thought he was simply ridding Judaism of an obnoxious, heretical sect. What he did not realize was that he was pursuing the very people of God, the followers of the Messiah. And by persecuting them, he was persecuting the body of the Messiah, and thus persecuting the Messiah Himself.

God in His sovereign love, grace, and knowledge allows, and even ordains persecution for His children. Yet this is not a light thing. For the Lord, it is a personal matter. Those who suffer oppression are His sheep, His children, His body. He will never forget their suffering. Neither must we (Hebrews 13:3).



# ABOUT ANM

Thank you for reading our e-book on the Bible and persecution. We hope it blessed you and drew you closer to the Lord as you gained a deeper understanding of God's love and compassion for the persecuted and suffering.

Founded in 1992, Advancing Native Missions serves as a bridge between individuals and churches and fruitful local pastors and ministries around the world. Instead of sending missionaries abroad, we help you invest in local ministries that are doing God's work effectively among their own people.

We are blessed to help our fellow Christians come alongside hundreds of ministries in over 100 different countries around the world. Each of these ministries is bringing the life-changing love and message of salvation of Jesus to those who have never received it.

Many of the partner ministries we connect you with work in countries and regions where Christians face deep and often very painful persecution for their faith. In light of this, we have written this e-book to help our fellow believers to gain a better understanding of this painful reality that has and continues to play an integral role in the daily lives of many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world.

Again, we pray you were blessed by this resource. If you would like to learn more about how you can be a part of the work God is doing through local pastors and church leaders around the world, or if you would like to download other valuable missions-minded resources, please visit our website at [advancingnativemissions.com](http://advancingnativemissions.com)

