

# Persecution and Martyrdom

for Whom?

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## **PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM FOR WHOM?**

Is there a future martyrdom of saints? Does persecution always result from righteous living? Is martyrdom a badge of honor? Will God provide a "place of safety" for true Christians? Does He protect the spiritually weak or those who are "worthy" only? This article will answer these questions and explain what the Bible says about persecution and martyrdom.

True Christians will be persecuted, even martyred. Jesus warned His disciples, ". . . beware of men: for they will deliver you up to councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues . . . And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. . . . And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake . . ." (Matthew 10:17, 21–22). Jesus further stated, ". . . the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" (John 16:2). Jesus knew His true disciples would be hated by the world ". . . because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:14).

In His Olivet prophecy, Jesus told the disciples, "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you . . . For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved . . ." (Matthew 24:9, 21–22). Jesus knew what the future bode! He knew, just prior to His return, Christians would endure the most difficult time the world has ever seen, and that many of them would be persecuted, even put to death! That time is yet in the future!

### **Persecution, Martyrdom for Righteousness' Sake**

The Apostle Paul wrote, ". . . all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). Persecution comes as a result of living a life obedient to God's commandments and laws. Jesus said, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matthew 5:11–12). He explained, "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven . . ." (Luke 6:22–23). Jesus said the world would hate true Christians because they "are not of the world" (John 15:19). They do not think, act, or do what the world does. They truly are not "of the world." They are hated for the "name of Jesus" because they follow Christ's example and live by every word of God (1 John 2:6, Matthew 4:4). Yet an utterly deceived world will believe true Christians deserve to die, and will martyr them, even believing that they do God a service (John 16:2).

## **Persecution for Other Reasons**

Overlooked in Jesus' warning to Christians, however, is the fact that persecution can come for reasons other than righteousness! Note Matthew, chapter five: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Matthew 5:10). If Christians can be persecuted for "righteousness' sake," the clear implication is that they can also be persecuted for unrighteousness. Note verse eleven, "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely. . . ." One is blessed if false accusations lead to persecution. But is he blessed if the accusations are true?

It is dangerous to assume that the only basis for persecution against Christians is their righteous acts. Christians can, and do, sometimes sin, and persecution results from these mistakes. Peter wrote, ". . . if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye . . . For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing" (1 Peter 3:14, 17). Christians can suffer for evil doing! Persecution can come about as a result of unrighteousness! Peter elaborated by stating, "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf" (1 Peter 4:14–17). These above texts make plain that persecution can come as a result of following Christ's righteous example, as well as by being an evildoer! Persecution is not always the result of doing what is pleasing to God. Persecution can come directly as a result of acts which displease God!

The Bible censures one group of Christians who are so displeasing to God that He says, "So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Revelation 3:16). The indictment against this group is not because of righteousness, but because they are ". . . wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind [spiritually], and naked." Yet they are so deceived about their spiritual condition that they believe they are ". . . rich [spiritually], and increased with goods, and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17). But it is God's Word which will judge them, not their opinion of themselves (John 12:48).

## **All Christians to Be Scattered?**

Jesus told His true followers, "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man" (Luke 21:36). This implicit warning refutes the idea that Christians automatically will be delivered from persecution and martyrdom. In fact, it clearly tells us one cannot escape unless he is worthy! Thus, the Scriptures make it plain, there will be

some worthy to escape the coming trial; while a greater number, because they are not worthy, will be forced to go through tribulation! While it is true many Christians will be scattered because of persecution (Mark 13:27), it is equally true others will be protected in a place prepared of God (Revelation 12:6, 14). It is an assumption that all Christians are either scattered or gathered together. The Scriptures tell us there will be Christians who are scattered, as well as those located in a specific place prepared for them. Both groups are to be included in the rewards at Christ's return. While those protected in a place of safety will not go through the tribulation, many if not all scattered Christians will. (Compare Revelation 3:10 with Revelation 3:15–19; Revelation 12:14 with Revelation 12:17; Matthew 24:46–47 with Matthew 24:48–51 and Matthew 24:31 with Revelation 12:14.) It is a moot point to argue that Revelation, chapters two and three, refer to church eras rather than to attitudes. Either may be true. What is really important is the attitude of each individual Christian. One could be in the "Philadelphian era" yet maintain an attitude which would exclude him from the promises given to that group. What must be realized is: individual Christians have been persecuted and martyred in every "era" of time, but what relates to a specific church (era or attitude) in Revelation, chapters two and three, will affect all those who comprise that group. Do not make the mistake of assuming that since individual martyrdoms have taken place from the beginning of Christianity, the promises of protection or persecution, given to individual churches in Revelation two and three, are not valid promises. Whether we are referring to an "era" or an attitude, Revelation, chapter three, specifically relates promises of protection or persecution. Protection for those who have not denied Christ's name; persecution for those who have become lukewarm spiritually!

### **Persecution, Martyrdom—Badges of Honor?**

Some have assumed persecution and martyrdom are "a great honor in God's sight."

They can be.

Many of the great men of God were martyred (Hebrews 11:35–38). Paul's account in Hebrews, chapter eleven, is historical. As stated earlier, individual men of God and Christians have been martyred throughout all periods of time. But these should not be confused with those present-day Christians (whether organized as church eras or of a common kindred attitude), who, as a whole, will either be protected or be persecuted according to the book of Revelation. What must be realized is that while persecution can be a "badge of honor," it oftentimes is not. Both Christ and the Apostle Peter stated that there can be reasons other than righteousness for persecution. Peter said, ". . . let none of you [Christians] suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters" (1 Peter 4:15). Could a Christian murder, steal, practice evil, or meddle and still be a Christian? Jesus said only one sin was unpardonable—blasphemy against the

Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31). A Christian could be guilty of the above, repent and remain a Christian. But the persecution and subsequent penalty which could result from such offenses would likely be irrevocable (Romans 13:1–4). Much of the persecution the Jews suffered in Paul's day was self-generated (Romans 1:22–24, 1 Thessalonians 2:15). Their incapability to practice what they preached led to blasphemy against the name of God Himself! A Christian who is guilty of "evil" will most surely bring reproach upon the name of Christ and upon God's Truth! That is why Peter said, ". . . let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters" (1 Peter 4:15). He knew what this kind of conduct leads to—blasphemy against the name of Christ, and THE REPUDIATION OF EVERYTHING TRUE CHRISTIANITY UPHOLDS! (compare 2 Samuel 12:14 with Ezekiel 16:25.) While martyrdom is generally the result of righteous conviction, persecution may or may not be. Therefore, only persecution and martyrdom for righteousness' sake is a valid "badge of honor."

### **Spiritually Weak to Be Rewarded?**

Paul wrote, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). Does this mean ". . . that others not being able to withstand such physical suffering, will be given a "way out"—a way whereby they may be able to "bear" their fate: a place of physical (temporary) protection and shelter!?" (*Good News*, December 1976, p. 5.)

Let us first answer the following questions: How does God enable the Christian to bear a temptation by making a way to escape? If the Christian is allowed to escape the temptation, then he did not have to bear it. If God makes a way of escape how does that enable the saint to undergo it? Saints would not need to endure temptations if God made a way to escape!

This verse, as translated, is contradictory.

The problem is the translation. The phrase, "make a way to escape," is from the Greek word *ekbasin*. It is used only one other time in the New Testament, in Hebrews 13:7. Of *ekbasin*, *A Greek-English Lexicon* by Arndt and Gingrich, page 237 says, ". . . Hb 13:7 can mean the end of one's life . . . but can also prob. be understood as (successful) outcome, result of one's way of life. . . ."

Hebrews 13:7 reads, "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end [*ekbasis*] of their conversation [conduct]." The Greek *ekbasin* could not mean escape here. It could only mean the result of one's way of life. Thus 1 Corinthians 10:13 should read, ". . . God is

faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make [to present] the end result [of enduring], that ye may be able to bear it." In other words, God will allow the saint to comprehend in advance the result of enduring the temptation. He will then have the strength to undergo it. This text does not support the notion that Christians who are unable to stand physical suffering will be given a place of physical protection and shelter!

The Bible nowhere promises to reward those who are spiritually weak or those who lack faith, or those who have failed to live up to the Christian commitment. Such reasonings are justifications for failure to grow and overcome (2 Peter 3:18). The Bible says, "The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished" (2 Peter 2:9). Peter wrote, ". . . if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" (1 Peter 4:18). Paul said, ". . . he that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons" (Colossians 3:25). These texts demonstrate the necessity for the individual Christian to overcome, to master the self and to live by every word of God. Nowhere does God promise to protect and deliver those who use 1 Corinthians 10:13 as an excuse for indifference, spiritual laziness, and apathy in their approach to Christian living! (Compare Romans 2:9, 1 Corinthians 5:5; 6:9–10; Ephesians 5:5–6; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 2 Timothy 2:12; Hebrews 2:2–3; 1 Peter 4:17.)

### **Are Christians to Judge?**

Christians are the future judges of the world (1 Corinthians 6:2). They must now learn to discriminate between good and evil. Character building requires daily evaluation. We evaluate what we say and what we do. We must evaluate even what we think! The basis for this evaluation is God's Word. Those who are maturing spiritually have, by reason of use, exercised their senses to discern both good and evil (Hebrews 5:14).

Association with others is an important area of evaluation. Paul said, ". . . bad company is the ruin of good character" (1 Corinthians 15:33, *Moffatt*). It is absolutely necessary for true Christians to avoid close association with those whose lifestyle and character do not meet Christian standards. Paul explained the principle of evaluating associations when he wrote, ". . . I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat" (1 Corinthians 5:11).

The Ten Commandments define God's Law. They illustrate godly character. It is impossible for those who live outside God's Law to be spiritual brethren of true Christians. Association with them is of necessity limited. There is no spiritual common ground. Close spiritual fellowship is reserved for those who obey God. Therefore, true Christians carefully

judge those with whom they associate. They must not develop close spiritual associations with those who refuse to adhere to godly standards. This requires judgment and discernment.

The Christian is not to condemn others (Matthew 7:1–5). That is Christ's prerogative. But judging or evaluating associates is not condemning them. The Greek *krino* (judge), is not limited to the meaning of "condemnation." In Matthew 7:1, the sense clearly is to "administer justice, judge, pass judgment upon" (see *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, by Arndt and Gingrich, page 452). *Krino* also means to separate, distinguish, select, prefer, think, consider, decide, propose, intend, as well as judge, hale before a court, condemn, hand over for judicial punishment. The use of Matthew 7:1 or Romans 14:10 as proof Christians are not to discriminate or be selective in their associations, is not substantiated Scripturally. The Christian is not to hate others, but rather he is to hate evil ways. His refusal to associate with those who practice evil is a necessary evaluation he must make in order to avoid corrupting his own character. Paul included church members in this evaluation! Notice it, ". . . do not ye judge them that are within?" (1 Corinthians 5:12.) He further said, ". . . he that is spiritual judgeth all things . . ." (1 Corinthians 2:15). This includes one's associations. The Christian, therefore, judges not only himself, but others (1 Corinthians 11:31, 1 Corinthians 5:11–12).

This process does not allow for condemnation, evil-speaking or down-grading others. It simply requires the evaluation of associations on the basis of God's Word. The Christian then refrains from fellowship with those who live ungodly. The matter of condemnation is left in God's hands (James 4:11–12). When it comes to evaluating Christian associations, those who advocate the idea, "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil," obviously never really studied the New Testament!

### **What Is the Proper Attitude?**

Evaluation and condemnation are not the same thing. Neither are self-righteousness and righteous living. The Pharisees were exceedingly zealous for the law. They meticulously observed the most minor detail. Yet they looked down on others, felt spiritually superior and displayed a general attitude of self-righteousness. Jesus did not censure their obedience to God's Law. He censured their worship of man-made tradition and their failure to comprehend the spiritual intent of God's Law. Jesus told His disciples, ". . . except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Jesus knew that kind of righteousness could not come except by the power of God's Spirit (Romans 8:1–4). It is by the grace of God that Christians can attain the kind of faith necessary for salvation (Ephesians 2:8). So what, then, is the proper attitude necessary to sustain the spiritual growth required for overcoming and enduring to the end?

For one thing, there is much more involved than the attitude of the publican in Luke, chapter eighteen. Those who say, "It's far safer to be in the publican's attitude of, 'God be merciful to me a sinner'," overlook the fact that the reason the publican was in that attitude was because he was a sinner! Christians are not to sin in order to have a humble attitude!

Repentance requires an entire change of attitude (Job 42:5–6). That attitude must continue throughout life. It comes with the recognition that man is incapable of perceiving his true spiritual condition apart from God (Jeremiah 10:23), and that one must constantly check himself in order to maintain a right relationship with God (Isaiah 66:2).

Being "poor in spirit," and having childlike willingness, result from a deep sense of appreciation toward God—appreciation for life, for the knowledge of His Truth, for His Holy Spirit and for the plan of salvation being worked out in one's life. The "poor in spirit" have emptied themselves of vanity, conceit and self-will. They are the blessed (Matthew 5:3). Those who maintain a childlike spirit will enter the "kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). They are not competing with God in an attempt to maintain their "rights." They recognize they have no rights, for they belong to God (Romans 12:1–2). They know that in the human flesh dwells "no good thing," but with the help of the Holy Spirit they are able to live a life pleasing to God (Romans 7:18; 8:1–6). They have no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3). Their confidence is in God and Christ (1 John 5:14).

There is no room for self-righteousness in this relationship. While they abhor sin and refuse to associate with those who practice it (heresy), their motive in remaining separate is not based on the condemnation of individuals. They will often be accused of self-righteousness and judging by those who feel guilty, but true Christians know judgment belongs to God alone (1 Peter 4:3–4, Acts 10:42). There is no proud spirit among those who have the proper attitude, for they know God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). Above all, they are thankful for the grace bestowed upon them to comprehend the Truth as it always was, and for being given the confidence and faith to continue in obedience to their convictions when the vast majority of their brethren prefer to place their confidence in men.

This is the acceptable attitude which is proper to God. True Christians know that no matter what the future may bring, no matter what persecution may arise, Christ will not forsake them because they did not forsake Him at a time when almost the entirety of God's people did!

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