

5 Promises for the Persecuted

By Eric McKiddie

You don't have to look hard to find an article or news headline talking about persecution of the Christian church. Such real-life stories cause us to pray all the more earnestly with the Apostle John, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

Besides these national/international headlines, many of our brothers and sisters face persecution in the forms of social marginalization, slander, loss of opportunity, and more. Even in America, less intense forms of persecution are becoming more prevalent.

How ought God's people think about persecution? It's an important question because how we think about it will necessarily affect how we face it. Will we face persecution with fear or with faith? To endure it with faith, we need something in particular to believe in, which is why God has given us his word. So consider these promises in Scripture for those who go through persecution.

1. We will face persecution

While imprisoned and awaiting execution, Paul wrote to Timothy, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). "All" is not a throwaway word in this verse. Paul means it. Everyone who publicly lives as a committed Christian will face some kind of resistance from the world. This verse ought to recalibrate our expectations. We should be surprised when we *don't* face persecution, not when we do, because God's word promises us that at times we will. That doesn't make experiencing opposition easier any more than knowing your due date makes giving birth less painful. But at least you can be prepared.

2. There is blessing in persecution

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encouraged his disciples with these words, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:10). Jesus defines "persecution" as being reviled and having false things uttered about you. Could there be a better blessing than membership in the kingdom of heaven? Those who endure opposition in this world can be comforted by the fact that they belong to the world to come.

One caveat regarding this blessing is that it is for persecution for "righteousness' sake." Unfortunately, some Christians have acted obnoxiously, have been confronted about it, and have called it persecution. That is not what Jesus is talking about here.

3. God manifests his strength to those facing persecution

The Corinthians were looking down on Paul's persecutions as a sign that God's blessing was not upon his ministry, and that he was not an apostle to be followed. Paul corrected their thinking, telling them "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

It is common for Christians to define success in life as triumphalism and to equate strength with accomplishment. But Paul turns the common thinking on its head. Experiencing health and wealth is not the sign that God's power is with you, but rather that you are enduring persecution through the strength he provides.

4. God sees the purity of those who have given their lives for the sake of Christ

In John's vision of the seal judgments, the fifth seal depicts the souls of those who had been martyred because of their witness for Christ. "They cried out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?' Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer" (Rev. 6:10-11).

In Revelation, white clothing represents a pure life (see also Rev. 3:4-5; 7:9-14; 19:8). Those who are persecuted are viewed to be in the wrong, even evil, by their persecutors. But when we face opposition for our faith, we can be assured that God regards us as righteous before him. Knowing that God is pleased with us, despite what others might say or think, helps us persevere.

5. God will vindicate those who are persecuted

Later in Revelation, John sees the moment these souls had been waiting for. "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants...Hallelujah, the smoke from her goes up forever" (Rev. 19:1-3).

It might sound odd for God's people to celebrate God's vengeance and judgment. That is because we haven't seen our loved ones drastically hurt or killed for the sake of the gospel – we are only as close as the pictures on our web browser. It also rubs us wrong because in our relativistic culture, we have all but lost our sense of God's judgment as being "true and just". But for those who have seen their family members and friends murdered right before their eyes, this is a comforting verse that increases their hope for Jesus' return.

The Power of Promises

We get the strength to endure when we trust that God will be faithful to us no matter what. God's promises are his guarantee of this. Jesus' death on the cross for our sins and resurrection from the dead are our primary example that God keeps his promises to the persecuted. He did not abandon his Son; he raised him and vindicated him. God will do the same for all those who are united to his Son through faith, for we are his children, too.

Written by:

Eric McKiddie serves as Pastor for Gospel Community at the Chapel Hill Bible Church.