
Persecution

“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (II Timothy 3:12).

Jesus did not promise His disciples a life of luxury and ease. He sent them forth like sheep in the midst of wolves. He warned them of trouble in the synagogue, and persecution from city to city. He spoke of death at the hands of deluded men who would think they were doing God a service.

The source of this persecution is most interesting. It did not come from disgruntled publicans and harlots, or from corrupted political powers like Herod and Pilate. The source of the persecution, at least initially, was religious people. It came from those who professed an allegiance to Jehovah and a loyalty to the Scriptures. It came from those who read the Bible in the Synagogue and emblazoned it upon the doorposts of their homes. They committed its words to memory and placed its holy message in the borders of their garments. They laboriously counted the letters of every inspired word so that they might not inadvertently omit a single jot or tittle from the Law of God. They were scrupulous beyond our comprehension in their diligent attempts to study the Bible, and yet — paradoxically — they felt a “religious” compulsion to crucify the Author of the Bible.

The context of II Timothy 3:12 involves the persecutions which Paul received at Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. This persecution came from fanatical Jews who thought they were serving Jehovah. This was the same element of society which persecuted Jesus . . . and which would also persecute Timothy. This is also the same mentality which will persecute all who dare to imitate the life-style of that lowly Carpenter who fraternized with the "wrong kind" of people.

A sheep does not have to be troublesome and provocative in order to be attacked by ravening wolves. It is the very nature of wolves to attack a sheep regardless of his behavior. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God. He is eternally kind, and understanding. He is the very personification of love. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus did not have to change His nature in order to be persecuted. As a matter of fact, the more mercy He displayed, the more determined His enemies were to destroy Him.

God did not just love the Jews, He loved the whole world. When Jesus made reference to the care of God for Gentiles, His neighbors at Nazareth sought to cast Him headlong down a cliff (Luke 4:29).

People have always meant more to God than rules and regulations. The sabbath day was made for man, not vice versa. When Jesus healed a man on the sabbath day who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, the Jews sought the more to slay Him (John 5:16). In Galilee He healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath Day and they went out and held a council against Him, how they might destroy Him (Matthew 12:14).

I repeat that these were religious men who plotted the death of the Son of God. Their strong antagonism to Jesus was directly associated with their perverted approach to the Bible. Anyone who studies the Bible without a proper emphasis on love is liable to the same outrageous errors and inconsistencies. Pilate could find no fault in Him! The Jews, however, cried out: "We have a law and by our law He ought to die . . ." (John 19:8).

The point, again, is that persecution often comes from deeply religious people who think they are doing God service. When you dare to be like Jesus you are exposing yourself to danger. When you endeavor to imitate His love for all people, regardless of race, color, or denomination, you are a prime candidate for the proverbial "ax." Do not be surprised if the

people who wield that ax have a "testament" in their vest pocket or a purse full of "Biblical" tracts. Their antagonism to you may be nothing personal, but rather an act of religious devotion. They may not want to do it, but they feel that they have to. Those who put you to death, said Jesus, will think they are doing God service (John 16:2).

I suppose that there are certain dangers associated with the suggestion that "all who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." It may create in some a "persecution complex." It may cause some of us to be accusing and offensive in our dealings with others. It could conceivably lead us into a life-style which is diametrically opposed to the genius of the Christian Spirit. But it is in the Bible, and for that reason it needs to be considered.

The Sermon on the Mount

The "Sermon on the Mount" should be studied in the context of Jewish legalism. Jesus did not come to destroy the law, but rather to fulfill it. He proposed a life-style which would transcend legalism. Legal concepts are fraught with controversy, but there is no argument against love. Love is the major doctrine in all the Bible, but in particular of the Sermon on the Mount. It is the very essence of all that God requires. The Biblical doctrine of love is not some weak and watered down philosophy which has no impact upon our lives, it is rather the most revolutionary concept in all the world. Those who dare to emulate the Jesus kind of love will find themselves enslaved to the victims of poverty and discrimination and in devout prayer for those who spit in their face and drive nails into their hands.

But note that the life-style of love and mercy is beset by persecution. Take, for example, the beatitudes. There seems to be a logical progression through the process of conversion and Christian maturity, to the place where we are persecuted for righteousness sake.

The beatitudes begin with the "poor in spirit" who "mourn" because of their own unrighteousness. They progress to "meekness" which means that they are teachable individuals who come to "hunger and thirst" after righteousness. Next they develop "mercy" and a "pure heart." Finally they strive to be "peacemakers" and to unite the divergent and divided peoples of earth. This is the proverbial straw which breaks the camel's back. The Jews could have tolerated Jesus and His disciples

if He would have only associated with the "right kind" of people. Acts 22:21-22 provides us with an interesting case in point. The Jewish people gave audience to Paul up to the very moment when He dared to mention the Gentiles. At that juncture the Scriptures record:

"And they gave him audience unto this word, and then lifted up their voices and said, away with such a fellow from the earth, for it is not fit that he should live . . ." (Acts 22:22)

Therefore Jesus followed His remarks about "peacemakers" with a stern reminder about persecution:

". . . Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for their's is the kingdom of heaven. 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 5:9-12).

While our thoughts are focused on the Sermon on the Mount, note also the "Golden Rule" and the verses which immediately follow.

I am convinced that the "Golden Rule" of Matthew 7:12 is the "strait gate" and the "narrow way" of Matthew 7:13-14. Love is far more narrow and demanding than legalism. But note the next verses which warn of men that look like sheep but who have the inward nature of ravening wolves. Ravening wolves do not have mercy, and neither did the Scribes and the Pharisees. Their strong "religious" convictions seemed to preclude the possibility of showing mercy. Mercy and compassion were "weaknesses" to be avoided rather than virtues to be incorporated into their lives. They paid their tithes of mint, anise, and cummin, but omitted the "weightier" matters of the law.

It is to be profoundly regretted that mercy is not a major doctrine in the rank and file of evangelical Christianity.

The Example of Paul

Probably no one had a better insight into persecution than did Paul. He knew what it was to be a persecutor, and he also knew what it was to be persecuted.

It was his zeal for God which caused him to persecute Christians and try to compel them to blaspheme. The irreligious

and the indifferent could not care less, but Saul of Tarsus was super conscientious. This is why he was on his way to Damascus with authority to imprison and persecute the followers of Jesus.

His dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road brought about his own persecution. In Damascus he escaped from his enemies by being lowered over the wall in a basket. This was only the beginning of sorrows. In virtually every city where he went to preach Jesus he was persecuted. His persecution invariably came from those who had a legalistic approach to religion. How well he must have understood their point of view.

It would have been easy for Paul to avoid any contact with these who chased him from city to city. One might even expect him to develop a hate for the synagogues in which he had been beaten and abused so many times. It would have been natural for him to hang out with the Gentiles where he was loved and avoid the Jewish legalists who were responsible for so much torment and torture. Quite to the contrary. He continued to love the Jews and to pray for them which persecuted him. He believed that the gospel was to the "Jew first" and the synagogue was always the first place where he would preach. At a time when the Jews were plotting his death (Acts 20:3), he wrote to the Romans:

"I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh . . ." (Romans 9:1-3).

Encouragement for Timothy

Some have assumed from I Corinthians 16:10 and other passages that Timothy may have had a problem with timidity and fear. Be that as it may, when Paul came down to the last mile of the road he wrote an impassioned letter to Timothy and suffering is a part of every chapter. Read again the epistle of II Timothy from this perspective.

Chapter 1 — Paul is in prison waiting to die, but is unswerving in his faith. He knows whom he has believed and is persuaded that He is able to keep that which he has committed unto Him against that day. Timothy is therefore encouraged to stir up the gift of God and to remember that God does not give us a spirit of timidity and fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Therefore Timothy is urged to be bold

and unashamed of Paul, and also to be a partaker of the affliction of the gospel. Additional reference is made to Paul's suffering, and Timothy is admonished to hold to sound doctrine in faith and love.

Chapter 2 — Timothy is to endure hardness as a good soldier, remembering that Jesus, though put to death in the flesh, was raised up by the power of God. Additional reference is made to Paul's suffering "enduring all things for the elect's sake" and a reminder that if "we suffer with him we shall also reign with him . . ."

Chapter 3 — Timothy was from the vicinity of Derbe and Lystra, and was no doubt an eyewitness of Paul's suffering in those cities. Timothy knew what it was to see leaders of the synagogue cast stones at a preacher of the gospel and drag his blood stained body out of the city and leave him for dead. Thus he wrote:

"But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, patience, persecutions, afflictions which came unto me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra; what persecutions I endured: but out of them all the Lord delivered me. Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse . . ." (II Timothy 3:10-13).

Chapter 4 — Please remember that all Timothy had to do in order to incur the wrath of some people was to be like Paul. Remember also that Paul was simply trying to be like Jesus. Both Jesus and Paul went about doing good, and both were violently opposed by men who failed to see the love emphasis of the Scripture. Therefore, as Timothy was commissioned to "preach the word" he was also warned to "watch in all things," and to "endure afflictions." Paul is ready to die, and he is confident of his reward. Timothy is warned of Alexander who did Paul much harm and greatly withstood his words. He is reminded that when Paul came up for trial no man stood with him but all forsook him. Jesus, however, proved faithful and stood by him so that the Gentiles might hear the gospel.

Anyone who believes that the gospel is for all people and puts that doctrine into practice is a prime candidate for religious persecution just like Jesus and Paul.

Persecution Today

There is an old joke about the man who said, "If I ever have a brain transplant, or a heart transplant, I would like for the

donor to be a bigot." "Why?" someone said. "Well," he replied, "I would have a brain which had never been used, and a heart which had never had to suffer."

There was a time when religious men with a legalistic bias could nail Jesus upon a cross, and there is little doubt in my mind that their descendants could crucify the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame. You will know these men by their fruits. Men do not gather grapes of thorns nor figs of thistles. The fruit of the Holy Spirit is love . . . and men who are filled with love will stand out like lights in darkness. Like a city set upon a hill they cannot be hidden. Men without that Spirit may profess to protect the light, but their every effort to do so will only produce darkness.

The original participants in the crucifixion were intelligent and capable men who were the leaders of their nation. In spite of their mental acumen, and intelligence, however, they crucified the Son of God through ignorance (Acts 3:17). Paul was such a man. He excelled in everything he did, he even excelled in the persecution of Christians. In spite of his cruelty he suffered no pangs of conscience. The fact that God could save a legalist like Paul is used as evidence that God can save anybody:

"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners: of whom I am chief. Howbeit, for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting." (I Timothy 1:15-16)

A Challenge to be Sheep

Violence has a tendency to beget more violence. Force seems to illicit a reaction which is equal and opposite. Sheep are nonviolent animals who are almost totally dependent upon their shepherd for survival. We are to be His people and the sheep of His pasture. The Lord is our Shepherd. He is our shield and defender. Vengeance belongs to Him, and He will repay. It is not necessary for us to punish the wicked, for God is the ultimate Judge and the executor of divine justice. He is perfectly capable of delivering the godly out of temptation and of reserving the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished. In nothing should we be terrified by our adversaries. Our calm assurance in the face of persecution will be a perennial reminder of our relationship with Jesus. It will be an evident token to our

enemies of their perdition and a constant goad against which it will be difficult for them to kick.

When Jesus made His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, He was tottering upon the back of a little colt that had never been ridden before. He was the very picture of defenselessness. As strange as it might seem, however, this meek and submissive spirit is the secret of our victory. Our strategy is love . . . and by this shall all men come to know that we are His disciples.

Questions for Discussion — Lesson Twelve

1. Why did the Jews of the first century persecute Christ and His apostles?
2. Which is more important, tithing or mercy?
3. Did Jesus ever use force to make men follow Him?
4. Is the Sermon on the Mount a "new law"?
5. Should a parent "turn the other cheek" when smitten by his own child?
6. Is it wrong for police to carry guns and be violent?
7. What are some of the obstacles to Christian unity in our generation?
8. Why didn't Paul hate the Jews who persecuted him?
9. Do you know anyone today who is being persecuted for the cause of Christ?
10. Compare Christianity and communism. Which will triumph?