



PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF THE RELEVANT VERSES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (HOLY BIBLE) WITH CONTEXTUALIZATION TO CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT Persecution of Christians started right from the earliest days of the Church in the first century AD and has continued to this day in various forms and degrees. The Socratic method is applied to evaluate the reasons for the same, and a Theology of persecution has been worked out. From this, attempts have been made to draw out parallels to today's situation, with emphasis on the inevitability of persecution in the Christian believer's life, its crucial role in the milieu of evangelism, the means to endure persecution, as well as mention of the benefits, rewards and endpoints regarding. (Henceforth in the article, Persecution is to be taken to mean Persecution of Christians).

KEYWORDS : Persecution, Christianity, believer, suffering, tribulation

INTRODUCTION

Persecution of the Christian believer is an integral part of living out the Christian faith, so much so that something would be remiss in the walk of the Christian believer if persecution is lacking. In 1998, German Evangelist Ulrich Parzany received a medal for his outstanding achievements in the area of youth work in Germany. In his response he said: "They crucified my Boss Jesus Christ. I am being honored. What did I do wrong?" Simson observes "There are three kinds of persecution: external, by national or local government, or other religious groups; internal, whereby Christians are fighting and persecuting each other, withholding blessing from each other, and filling up countries with "angry brothers" (Matt. 5:22-24); thirdly and probably worst of all, no persecution at all, because the Church is not worth being persecuted at all; its values and its lifestyle has blended with a godless society, the salt has become salt-less and is simply trodden under the feet of society unnoticed".

Theology of Persecution

Persecution is inevitable to those who want to do His will. The current day Church seems to have totally missed the point regarding the absolute inevitability of persecution, to various degrees and in various forms in the Christian's life. Penner³ writes "We fail to recognize that persecution is normative for the follower of Christ historically, missiologically, and (most importantly) scripturally." He adds the following statement: "Indeed, there can be no discipleship without persecution; to follow Christ is to join Him in a cross-carrying journey of reconciling the world to the Father."

A lack of persecution indicates a deviation from the expected Christendom is so focused on Comfort Zonology and Prosperity Theology that it is rare to find a church where persecution is preached; congregations would prefer to hear that the Christian will be well, rich, healthy and comfortable. Penner³ writes "Rather than following the common Western (not limited to, addendum mine) practice of thanking God for the privilege of living in a free country where we do not suffer for Him, the early Christians thanked God for the honor of suffering for His sake" (Acts 5:41).

Persecution is planned by God

God in the garden of Eden assured the crushing of the serpent's head but at the cost of bruising to the heel of Eve's offspring; persecution has been one of the main patterns woven onto the fabric of the life of everyone who chooses to do the right thing for God (1 John 3: 13) with Abel the archetype. Penner³ writes "Abel's death is clearly set in a context of martyrdom, a result of the conflict between the world and those who belong to God."

Persecution is modeled by Christ

Penner states³ "Weakness, suffering and sacrifice are God's modus operandi. This is how God accomplishes His work: not through strength or compulsion but through love and invitation". Jesus declared "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

Persecution propagates the Gospel

Josef Ton is said to have observed³ "Christ's cross was for propitiation. Our cross is for propagation." The Apostle Peter emphasises this (1

Peter 2:19), and Tertullian, a second and early third century theologian in his Apologeticus stated⁴ "The blood of the Gospel is the seed of the Church".

The Christian's suffering is needed to spread the Gospel. The Christian is an essential link (Col 1:24) in the chain of evangelism. Penner observes³ "God will thus bring the nations to Himself by the sacrifice of His obedient Son followed by the sacrifices of His other obedient sons and daughters."

Persecution requires the Christian's willingness

Willingness to be persecuted and endure suffering for His sake is what Jesus Christ desires from His people; that they would divert their focus from self, count the cost and set their sights on Him who is able to carry them through.

His presence is always with and will strengthen the Christian

They have a promise of His everlasting presence (Matt 28:20) and His strength (1 Peter 5:10). Persecution is followed by victory and reward (God's assurance). The assurance of victory in the end should help the Christian to take the right call. Penner states³ "The Christian in Revelation is called to witness for Christ, even to the point of death, in the midst of compromising Christianity and a hostile world, knowing that his reward is coming."

Definitions

Word definition (literary)

to cause persistent suffering to, to disturb the peace of mind of (someone) especially by repeated disagreeable acts⁵ a program or campaign to exterminate, drive away, or subjugate people based on their membership in a religious, ethnic, social, or racial group⁶ hostility and ill-treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs; oppression⁷

cruel and unfair treatment of a person or group, especially because of their religious or political beliefs, or their race⁸

Synonyms - afflict, agonize, anguish, bedevil, beset, besiege, curse, excruciate, harrow, plague, rack, torment, torture⁵

Jesus' opinion on persecution

Jesus' view about persecution of His beloved believers -He feels the persecution personally, as is clear by the His response "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" to Saul's question on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:5).

What is not persecution (for the Christian faith)

Here clarity as to what is NOT religious persecution is required. Socially and economically disadvantaged peoples and groups have been oppressed, suppressed and exploited globally and through the ages by the rich and powerful. Tempting as it would be to include at least a part of this as discrimination against Christianity (as in many countries most converts to Christianity originate from these groups) it would not be strictly correct. As a personal example, the author with his Dalit convert antecedents has faced discrimination through his life, but little if any of that can be truly labelled persecution for his Christianity.

Who are the persecutors?

1) Individuals in their personal capacity often persecute Christians.

a) Unbelievers. intolerance, bitterness, jealousy, and hatred can incite persecution by the advantaged “superior” of the disadvantaged “inferior”. The very fact that a Christian student is at par (sitting in the same row, getting the same attention or performing equally well) with a non-Christian student is often enough to provoke persecution.

b) Nominal Christians. When Nominal Christians who live worldly lives see a believing Christian whose life does not conform to the values of the world, this provokes hatred and incites persecution. This started in the early days of Christianity, as we shall see shortly.

c) Believers Sometimes believing Christians who belong to the same or other denominations can out of jealousy, bitterness or selfish desire for power, position and glory persecute their own brethren. This happened to Paul as he was imprisoned (Phil 1:15).

2) Groups of people

a) Family

Members of the same family are often the strongest opponents of new converts, and sometimes will continue this as long as they are alive. This has been predicted by our Lord Jesus (Mark 10:29,30) and is continuing to this day, to varying degrees. Most of the so-called upper caste converts to Christianity are thrown out of their homes, disinherited and treated as outcasts.

b) Community (caste etc) In India, caste plays a crucial role in the religious system and beliefs. For example, the classification of severity of sins changes with caste and gender⁹ (Transgressions are also gender and class (varna) based, and what is considered as pāpam for one class or gender may not be so for another) and as the caste system is inextricably linked with religion, a change in religion naturally means a loss of the caste status. As mingling with a lower caste renders one ritually unclean¹⁰ this discrimination is deeply entrenched in the Hindu religion. Of course, converts from the Muslim faith are considered worthy¹¹ of death; currently there are twelve countries imposing the death sentence and another thirteen with severe punishments for apostates¹².

3) Belief Systems

Christian are perceived as countercultural as they do not participate in most of the religious and other traditional rituals commonly practiced in the land, and this provokes intolerance, inciting dislike and even hatred in the minds of the majority.

4) Governments

In India, the law of the land is blatantly discriminatory against Christians. For example, in some states, new converts to Christianity are required by law to register with the local Government machinery, upon which they are subjected to systematic harassment by the authorities in subtle and not so subtle ways in order to induce them to reconvert. At present there are four states with the “Freedom of Religion Act” in force, (with another state naming it “Prohibition of forcible conversion Act”) ironically named as the purpose is to restrict “forcible or induced” conversions to Christianity¹³, with the same Act used to convert Christians to Hinduism. The Ghar Wapsi movement is one such initiative to induce Christians to reconvert and has over the last five years “convinced” large numbers to reconvert to Hinduism¹⁴. The Reservation System in India is another case in point. Christian are allotted less than one percent of seats and jobs in the current system, while according to current figures they consist of 2.8 percent of the population. In addition, the Government of India either turns a blind eye to most of the atrocities perpetrated against Christians and their properties or is uninterested in justice on their behalf.

Who will be persecuted?

1) Those who have sacrificed all for the sake of the Lord Jesus to obey His will, in addition to the promise of restoration of much more that what they sacrificed for His sake, receive a promise of persecution (Mark 10:29,30).

2) Those who want to live a godly life in Christ (2 Timothy 3:12). As mentioned before, this sets unattainable standards for the unbeliever, inciting hatred towards the believer who does not conform to the ways of the world.

When does persecution take place?

1) From the earliest New Testament times. Persecution of Christians started well before there was such a categorisation. For example, the response of the Sanhedrin to Peter and John preaching the Gospel after the healing of the lame beggar was to jail them and interrogate them (Acts 4:3-7). This was predicted by God as voiced by our Lord Jesus (Luke 11:49). Historically, the messengers of God, also called prophets in the Old Testament times were traditionally persecuted from the beginning, starting with Abel as stated by our Lord Jesus (Luke 11:50,51). Here Abel was listed as the first of the prophets, in a developing pattern of those for Him being persecuted by those against Him, similar to that which can be seen in the persecution of Isaac by Ishmael (Galatians 4:29).

2) Will increase before the second coming of Christ. One of the signs of the impending second coming of Christ will be the increase in persecution (Luke 21:12, Matthew 24:9).

Types of persecution

1) Social isolation and rejection. Many countries have a long history of this (including most Muslim countries where Sharia Law is enforced), also predicted by Jesus (Luke 6:22).

2) Professional discrimination. Christians who do not conform to the norms at the workplace have for long been discriminated against, persecuted, subjected to harassment, ridicule, unfairness in promotions, transfers, isolation and even physical threats and bodily harm.

3) Verbal insults and false incriminations. This ranges from the subtle nuances of language to outright insults and threats. This has occurred from the early days (Hebrews 10:33).

4) Physical intimidation and injury. Imprisonment and torture, state sponsored or otherwise continues even to this day. Paul speaks about this too (2 Timothy 3:11).

5) Loss of limb or life. Many Christians have lost their lives from the early days, from becoming human torches¹⁵ in Nero’s garden parties and being torn by beasts at the Coliseum, about two million Christians among an estimated seven million were killed by the early 4th century AD¹⁶. Paul makes mention of the early martyrs and the various ways they were killed (Hebrews 11:37).

Extent/Limits of persecution

We can recall that Satan had to literally stand in line (Job 1:6) before Almighty God to ask Him for permission to persecute righteous Job, and it may be boldly assumed that the same permissions would be necessary for the evil one to touch the Christian believer, with limits clearly set (Job 2:6) to the extent of the persecution allowed. This does not mean that Christians will never be killed as it is within God’s divine will that some will lose their lives for His sake (Hebrews 11:37).

We are assured that the evil one is never given access to destroy man’s soul (Matt 10:28a), and man is never abandoned or destroyed (2 Corinthians 4:9). Paul mentions the extent of the zeal and commitment with which he persecuted Christians before his conversion (Acts 22:4, Acts 26:11, Philippians 3:6). The Lord Jesus in His discourse after the Last Supper gives the reason for why people would wish to do so (John 16:2). The Apostle Paul also testifies that the Lord rescued him from them all (2 Timothy 3:11).

Scriptural analysis

Why will Christians be persecuted?

1) The world hates Christians

a) because it hated Jesus. The world, especially those in power, were threatened by His straightforward condemnation of the widespread hypocrisy and self-serving behaviour of the establishment. He predicted that Christians would be hated, and that too because of Him, the Name that Christians bear (Luke 21:12).

b) Because of the (uncompromising) standards the Christian lives up to. The standards everyone knows are the ideal, and impossible for the world to emulate, the Christian shines the light in the world (Phil 2:15) where people with evil deeds cannot tolerate the light (John 3:19,20).

c) Because the Christian does not fit in with the world. He does not

subscribe to the godless or idolatrous world view and does not, by either words or actions do or support the things done in it (Rom 12:2).

d) Because they are not of the world. Regenerated Christians, in many ways make it clear to the world that they do not belong. That fact was attested to by Lord Jesus after the Last Supper (Jn 15:16).

2) Because they persecuted Jesus Christ. Being a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ qualifies one for persecution by the world (John 15:20).

3) Because of the Word. Wherever the Word is preached, there will be persecution, a recurring pattern throughout Acts (Acts 4:2,3) which continues to this day.

4) Because they do not conform to the legalistic religious norms of the day. Even Jesus was persecuted because He healed on the Sabbath (John 5:16).

5) Christianity leads to loss of revenue. More people believing in Jesus Christ will lead to a loss of revenue for businesses that indulge in illegal, immoral and unChristian activities. Paul and Silas were imprisoned because they delivered a girl possessed with spirit of divination with subsequent loss of income for their owners (Acts 16:19,20) and the silversmiths at Ephesus stoked up an uproar in the city (Acts 19:23-27).

6) The Christian threatens the security of the establishment because he dares question, and attempts to mitigate the wrongs that happen in society.

7) The world will be jealous of the believer. Because of the spiritual power that he demonstrates, the signs and wonders that follow or the following that is gained (Acts 19:23-27, Acts 13:45).

8) Because that is what the world has done from the beginning (Acts 7:52).

Effects of persecution

1) Christians are shaken out of their complacency. Over the centuries, persecution has served to energise Churches and individuals, to set aside their petty differences and disagreements and unite in suffering.

2) Christians become more mature (Jas 1:2-4) in their faith; James correlates the presence of trials with perseverance and ultimately maturity in the faith.

3) Opportunities for the Gospel open up. Imprisoned Paul had a captive audience to whom he could preach the Gospel (Phil 1:12,13).

4) The world will see and realise the true nature of the Christian faith, able to see Christ in the responses of believers to persecution, which makes the believer display on the outside what he is filled with on the inside, the fruit of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit. For Love displayed has its greatest impact when its object the hater, joy in painful situations, peace in troubling times, patience under affliction, kindness to the unkind, gentleness to the harsh, faithfulness when all seems lost, godliness toward the ungodly and self-control towards the irritating (1 Pet 2:19-21).

5) The Church will grow stronger (Phil 1:14) when they see the fortitude with which other believers are able to endure persecution.

6) The Gospel will be preached in more places. As Christians were scattered more and more in response to the persecution, they moved to new places and were able to start their evangelism there as well, thus facilitating the spread of the Gospel to progressively wider circles (Acts 11:19).

Why are some Christians afraid of persecution?

1) They are not rooted in the Word (Matthew 13:21).

2) They do not relying on the power of the Holy Spirit for boldness and strength (Acts 4:31)

3) They do not trust in God to keep His end of the bargain (Psalm 20:7, Prov 3:5,6, Psalm 40:4).

4) They are afraid to "lose control" of the situation. Most have become

control freaks and are in their comfort zone only when they feel in control of things which in itself is an illusion, because in reality there is very little man actually can control. Case in point would be the current scenario of the COVID pandemic, where much political rhetoric has been thrown about of how "we" have controlled the pandemic, whereas in reality as of today the disease continues to spread and claim more lives.

Why no persecution? Why are most Christians not being persecuted these days? There are a few reasons for this glaring lacuna in current Christian lives.

1) They are not identified as Christians by their daily walk.

2) Their behaviour conforms with that of the world.

3) They no longer take a stand on important issues but compromise. It is so easy to do "almost" the right thing, to deviate from Divine direction by just a little so as to ruffle less feathers, to be liked a little more, or to be accepted a little more. James has some strong words to say about this attitude (Jas 4:4). The Christian compromises because he is too scared of the cost (Galatians 5:11), because he loves the things of the world too much, because he does not love the Lord enough and because he does not want to create an issue or rock the boat, as it were. Being politically correct is the way of the world, where there is no wrong or right, and where each man is a law unto himself. To go against the flow would mean rejection (Galatians 6:12) and this has crept into the Church as well. Witness recent times where there are Christian denominations that not only condone homosexuality but even conduct same sex marriages!

The Christian's response to persecution

This is the ideal response of the Christian to persecution and can happen only when the believer is filled with Agape love and truly trusts in the Lord, hating the world with all its attractions and having his hope only on the things above.

The Christian is to love his enemies (Matthew 5:44), pray for his enemies (Matthew 5:44), bless his enemies (Romans 12:14), flee (avoid) persecution (Matthew 10:23) where possible, endure persecution (1 Corinthians 4:12) if unavoidable, and to even delight in persecution (2 Corinthians 12:10).

How the Christian can withstand persecution

1) He needs to understand the inevitability of persecution for the true believer (1 Thessalonians 3:4).

2) He needs to keep in mind the result of enduring till the end (Revelation 2:10).

3) He needs to trust God enough to be able to give up control to His will and design (1 Cor 10:13).

4) He needs to see the faith of others who have endured the same (1 Thessalonians 3:7) for encouragement.

Benefits of persecution

The Christian will be blessed (Matthew 5:11, Luke 6:22), will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:10) where his heavenly rewards will be great (Matthew 5:12) and he will continue to be a source of encouragement to others facing trials (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

Assurances in persecution

1) Persecution cannot separate the Christian from God's love (Romans 8:35), cannot touch his immortal soul (Luke 12:4). The indwelling Holy Spirit will strengthen him (Eph 3:16) in his inner being and will teach him how to respond (Luk 12:11, 12) to accusations, false witnesses and the like.

CONCLUSIONS

Persecution is inevitable for the Christian who desires to follow Jesus Christ and obey His commands, as he will be hated by the world for his stand. As it is a necessary corollary of evangelism, he needs to be prepared to face it, even upto the point of losing his life, while continuing to love, bless and pray for those that persecute him, keeping in mind that his strength comes from above and great will be the blessings and rewards of enduring till the end. Scripture is contrary to the currently popular Prosperity Gospel which seems to be prevalent in

a substantial proportion of Churches these days. The Christian believer should not be surprised (1 Pet 4:12) and resort to protesting and appealing to justice when faced with persecution. Not once in the scriptures did the disciples take out rallies or protest their persecution, but rather bore their beatings, insults and shame silently; often actually rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be beaten for Jesus' sake.

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