

Christians Will Endure Persecution

I. Why?

II. How?

*(2 Timothy 3:10-15) You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, {11} persecutions, sufferings--what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. {12} In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, {13} while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. {14} But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, {15} and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

Just for a minute, I want you to imagine reading this ad in the newspaper or on Craigslist. For sale. 1997 Toyota Corolla. 285, 000 miles. Some rust. Needs brakes. AC does not work. Missing a fender. Won't start. \$5,000, firm. Tell me, does that sound like a car you'd want to buy? Did that ad make a believer out of you? I doubt it. Chances are, that ad would have had the opposite effect on you. It would have convinced you that that isn't the car you want to buy.

Do you know what that ad reminds me of? It reminds me of a verse in our Bible reading today. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 3:12, St. Paul writes for all to hear, *Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* I'm thinking, "Is that Paul's idea of how to attract more people to the Christian faith? Tell them that if they believe in Jesus, they will be persecuted? How is that going to work?" In fact, maybe that's the feeling you got when you read in the bulletin that our sermon theme today is: "Christians will endure persecution". You're thinking, "Great! Where do I sign up?"

But you see, God is not in the business of attracting buyers. Rather, he's in the business of telling people the truth. He wants you to know what's in store for you, as a follower of Jesus. And at the same time, he wants to equip you to handle whatever comes with life as a follower of Jesus. Today we continue our sermon series entitled, "The Word Works." In this case, the Word Works to help us persevere through persecution. Our sermon theme today is simply this:

Christians Will Endure Persecution.

We'll see both

I. Why we endure persecution

and

II. How we can endure persecution.

Our text for today comes from the Apostle Paul's second letter to his son in the faith, Timothy. In what many regard as the last epistle that Paul wrote before his death, Paul gives to Timothy some final words of advice about how to be a faithful minister of the Gospel in a world that is thoroughly corrupt. In fact, here in chapter 3, Paul begins by describing what the world would look like as we draw ever closer to the end. Paul writes, *There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power.* Paul's advice to

Timothy? *Have nothing to do with them (2 Timothy 3:1-5)*. By that, Paul doesn't mean, "Don't evangelize them." Rather, he means, "Don't imitate them."

From there, Paul goes on to draw contrast between the world's pattern of behavior and Paul's own life and teaching. That's where our text for the day picks up. Paul writes to Timothy, *You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance.*

But Paul not only calls attention to the good things that Timothy has seen in Paul's life. Paul goes on to include some of the hard things, namely, *persecutions, sufferings—what kind of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, the persecutions I endured*. Now, I expect that Timothy remembered what had happened in those cities, because he may have been an eyewitness to some of them. You and I, on the other hand, might need a little refresher. Fortunately, the book of Acts records for us that in Antioch, the Jewish leaders stirred up trouble against Paul and had him expelled from the city. In Iconium the Jews plotted to stone Paul to death but Paul fled the city before they could pull off their plot. In Lystra the Jews actually did stone Paul, dragging his lifeless body outside the city gates and leaving him for dead. It was only by the grace of God that Paul survived and continued on with his missionary journeys.

Really, all three incidents were just a sample of what Paul went through as a follower of Christ. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 11, St Paul offers a more detailed list. He writes, *I have been in prison more frequently, have been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked. I've been in danger for my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger from false brothers (2 Cor. 11:23-26)*.

Wow, you think about that a minute. Here you have arguably the greatest apostle of all time, the man whom Jesus personally called and commissioned to be his chosen instrument to the Gentiles, and what does Paul have to show for it? Death threats, concussions, broken bones, scars on his back—all because he was a believer? All because he was willing to confess Christ?!? Wow!

But now, maybe you are thinking, "That's the way it was back then. But that was then and this is now. In our modern world, Christians don't experience that kind of physical persecution." Think again. Recently the Open Doors organization, which tracks this kind of thing, reported that over 200 million Christians experience high, very high or extreme levels of persecution. Worldwide, one out of every 12 Christians lives in a country where Christianity is illegal, forbidden, or punished. In communist and especially Muslim countries, church bombings, abductions and torture of Christians are relatively common events.

But again, maybe you're thinking, "I guess there really is persecution going on around the world, but it's not like it's connected to our little WELS world." Uh, are you sure about that? You've maybe heard that our synod has been working with Hmong pastors living in North Vietnam recently. Allow me to share with you a little bit of one man's story, in his own words:

*People in my area started becoming Christian already in 1993 when we heard radio broadcastings about Christianity. From 1993 to 1997, Christianity spread very quickly in our area. We heard that if you believed, you would be released from Shamanism and Satan – so within a short amount of time, the whole area believed. I believed in 1997.*

*One of my uncles served in the army. When he found out that we had become Christians, he was so angry. He brought many guns to our house and he wanted to kill us. He also brought a big pot and was going to build a big fire and boil our whole family one by one for being*

*Christian. But he drank a glass of alcohol and we don't know what happened – he fell asleep on the table – and our family was spared. Early in the morning, he woke up. In the end, they arrested the whole village. The government forced us to make bricks, cut plants, and build houses. For one week we did hard labor for the government in our area. They brought us all together and the local officials would point a gun at the leaders of the church. “If you don't renounce your faith, we will kill you,” they threatened. But no one would renounce their faith. Since no one would renounce their faith, the government couldn't do anything.*

*After they released all of us believers, we went back to our village. But they didn't allow us to worship. So I remember we woke up at 1:00 AM to worship God. We couldn't turn on any lights – we just used some oil lamps so that we could worship from 1:00-2:00 AM. We did that from 1997 to 2000.*

As you hear those words, I want you to ask yourself two questions. First, if you were in that situation, would you do what they did? If someone put a gun to your head and said, “Renounce your faith in Christ or die,” would you? If the only time you could gather for worship was between 1 and 2 in the morning, would you do it? (as we think about how hard it can be for us to make it to church at much more convenient times.)

But maybe the bigger question is, Why? Why would such persecution have to happen in the first place? Why would a gracious God allow his children to go up against torture, death threats, and all forms of injustice and brutality? Well, let's keep a number of things in mind.

#1. Remember, Satan is still alive and well on planet earth. That means that whatever Satan has at his disposal to try to separate believers from God, he's going to use it—whether it's persecution, or temptation or sickness or hardship. Martin Luther put it this way in the Large Catechism: *We who would be Christians must surely expect to have the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies and must expect that they will inflict every possible misfortune and grief upon us. For where God's Word is preached, accepted or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind.*

That leads us to the second thing to keep in mind, namely, God says that Christians are destined to carry a cross in their lives. How did Jesus put it? *If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Mark 8:34).* In that case, what is the “cross”? The cross is what every Christian has to suffer because he's a Christian. It's whatever a Christian endures for the sake of the Gospel. If a person is thrown in jail or forced to do hard labor because she refuses to deny Christ, that's the cross. In fact, that's what Jesus told his disciples was in store for them, when he sent them out as his apostles. He said to them, *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)*

If you think about it, aren't those words being fulfilled all over the world today? You heard it in the account of the Hmong pastor. His uncle got so angry when he heard that his nephew had become a Christian. You see it as religious extremists plot terrorist attacks against the Christian “infidels.” In fact, you've maybe experienced it yourself when people ridiculed you for being a Bible-believing Christian. They accuse you of being judgmental, or intolerant, or bigoted. They shun you or treat you like you are intellectually inferior. It's no fun to endure that. But it's exactly what St. Paul said would happen. God was telling you the truth: *Everyone who wants to live a Godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* There's no dodging the truth. Christians will endure persecution.

But now, the real question is, the one that were really looking for an answer to, is not I. Why does persecution happen? But rather II. How can Christians bear up under the persecution

when it does happen? What could possibly lead a person to say to that government official, “Shoot me if you must, but I’m not going to deny Christ”? What gives a person that kind of courage, that kind of strength?

The answer? The Word does. That’s right. The Word Works! By that I don’t mean that the Bible is some kind of lucky charm, an amulet with magical power to give you courage. No rather, I mean that in the Bible, God tells you what you need to know. The Bible tells you the truth. And in the spiritual realm, with truth comes power. Knowledge gives you courage. And in the pages of his holy Word, God has given you both. What St. Paul said to Timothy, he could just as easily have said to you. *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

Yes, by God’s grace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God has made you wise. First, he’s made you wise by telling you the truth about yourself. God has revealed that you and I by nature are lost and broken people. We’ve messed up time and time again. And if left to ourselves, all we’d have in store for us would be eternal separation from God. But in his mercy, God has not left us to ourselves. Instead, he stepped into our world. He offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. By his death and resurrection, he has defeated death and guaranteed for us a life forever in heaven. That means that you now know where you stand with God. That means that with God at your side, yes, with God on your side, there’s nothing for you to fear. How did the Psalmist put it? *The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? (Psalm 118:6)*

What can man do to me? Isn’t that the attitude of those men in Vietnam? In effect they said to those government officials, “You can’t hurt us. You can kill us, but you can’t separate us from God. They would say with the Apostle Paul, “Nothing can separate us from God, *not trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword—nothing will be able to separate us from God’s love in Christ.*

My friends, you realize, that what those people in North Vietnam have, you have too. You have the Word. And with the Word comes the knowledge that you are all right with God. You are safe in Jesus’ arms. Heaven is your home. And it’s that precious and powerful truth that allows you and me to persevere, even through persecution. To God be the glory! Amen.