

How do we prepare for persecution ourselves?

The SDA approach to eschatological persecution often tends to focus on the correct identification of the eschatological actors portrayed in Daniel 10-12, Revelation 12-18 etc., and on the trigger events and sequencing of key events such as the close of probation, Jacob's time of trouble and the little time of trouble etc.

Open Doors, an evangelical group, focuses on spiritual preparation for when we personally experience persecution. This is laid out in the book, *Standing Strong Through The Storm*, which is a curriculum containing 6 key lessons relating to our spiritual preparation for, and response to, persecution. These 6 lessons are as follows¹:

1. Sometimes you need to build yourself a cell

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps.46.10). A Chinese church leader, who spent 23 years in prison, once said this to Christians who did not face persecution: "I was pushed into a cell, but you have to push yourself into one. You have no time to know God. You need to build yourself a cell, so you can do for yourself what persecution did for me—simplify your life and know God." It is vital that we spend time with God, to grow in Him, so we are prepared to stand strong in the face of persecution.

2. God keeps secrets

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55.8-9). There have been countless stories of persecuted Christians who have died without seeing the fruits of their labor. However, God knows all that has been and all that is to come. Our labor is not in vain, it is in His hands. He sees everything and no sacrifice or suffering either passes unnoticed or is forgotten by God.

3. Weakness is a direct path to power

"Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12.10). An Egyptian Christian reflected on the way he was treated when he converted to Christ: "In great suffering you discover a different Jesus than you do in normal life... Pain and suffering bring up to the surface all the weak points of your personality. In my weakest state, I had an incredible realization that Jesus loved me even right then." True empowerment does not come from human means, but through Christ alone. It often takes being at our weakest point to realize this.

4. Overcoming is greater than deliverance

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12.21). Persecuted Christians, no matter what country they are from, do not ask us to pray that persecution would end, but rather ask us to pray that they stand strong through the persecution. They do not wish so much to be delivered from the persecution as to be able to overcome the trials that they are facing in a way that is honoring to God. The persecuted crave the prayers of the comfortable.

5. Extreme hurt requires extreme forgiveness

"Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23.34). A Christian widow from Iran said, "I only had hatred in my heart for my enemies who had murdered my husband. But one day a miracle happened. God taught me how I could love my enemies... I had been praying for this, even though on the deepest level I didn't want it to happen. Gradually, through a process of ups and downs, God answered this prayer." The only way we can get through extreme hurt is by forgiving people as Christ did.

6. Prayer is the ultimate fellowship

¹ Taken from <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>.

“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Heb. 13.3). Many persecuted Christians often feel isolated and alone, since they are unable to fellowship with other believers. However, prayers from Christians around the world have brought the same amount of encouragement that fellowship would have for these persecuted Christians. Prayer is vital—not only as a direct line to God, but as a way to encourage our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world. 1 Cor. 12.26 tells us that we are one Body—when one member suffers, we all suffer. When one member is lifted up, we all rejoice. Persecuted Christians and Christians in the free world are not two separate entities, but rather are one Body. The persecuted Church needs the free Church to support them and most importantly to lift them up in prayer. The free Church in turn learns valuable lessons from the persecuted Church who have stood strong in the face of persecution. Christ is the head of the body and uses the whole Church (both free and persecuted) in unique and powerful ways.

How do we respond when facing persecution?

The teachings of Scripture are clear – we do not respond to persecution with violence. The Apostle Peter, once a man of impulsive violence was explicit in this regard (“...not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.” 1 Peter 3.9, NKJV). Jesus Himself, in the Sermon on the Mount, also rejected violence on the part of His disciples, (“But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, “bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you,” Luke 6.27-28, NKJV).

What then are some appropriate biblical responses to persecution?

- 1) Flee – when it is clearly the will of God, e.g. Joseph and Mary fleeing to Egypt when instructed by an angel to do so (Matt. 2.13-14). Jesus also commanded His followers to flee from one town to the next if they were persecuted (Matt. 10.23; Luke 9.5). The Apostle Paul fled on a number of occasions from one town to the next when facing persecution (Acts 9.25; 9.30). He did not make fleeing a constant practice, but fled when it was necessary to save his life and ministry.
- 2) Staying and enduring. This was modeled for us by Jesus Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22.41-52).
- 3) Hiding, e.g. Rahab hid the 2 spies. Many modern-day Christians are forced to either hide or hide others during times of persecution.
- 4) Boldly remaining as the salt and light of the world. This teaching of Jesus in Matt. 5.13-14 comes immediately after His beatitude on the blessings of those who experience persecution. Salt preserves, and light dispels darkness. When Christians flee, their preserving and enlightening impact departs with them.
- 5) Affirming a non-violent response. Disciples of Jesus Christ place their pain and desire for vengeance in the hands of God, who knows everything and will one day execute perfect justice (Ps. 43.1; Romans 12/17-21; Prov. 25.21-22).
- 6) By giving one’s life. This is a legitimate response to persecution, and a special crown is reserved for those who lay down their lives for their faith (Rev. 2.10).
- 7) Exercising legal privileges. The Apostle Paul was willing to use his rights as a Roman citizen to defend himself, and also to appeal to Caesar for a hearing (Acts 22, 25). When there are legal difficulties for Christians, Christians can document incidents and ask the worldwide Church for prayer and other support, provide financial support for persecuted Christians, serve as an advocate with government officials, and educate members about their legal rights within a given jurisdiction.

8) Don't be surprised. The Apostle Peter explicitly counsels disciples to NOT be surprised when facing persecution. "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed *are you*, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified" (1 Peter 4.12-14, NKJV).

9) Rejoice! In 1 Peter 4.13, we are commanded to rejoice in our sufferings, and the Apostle Paul commanded disciples to rejoice in all things (Phil. 4.4). James also commanded us to rejoice in our sufferings for Christ (Jas. 1.2-3), and we are to be comforted by the beautiful promise of God in Romans 8.25, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (NKJV).

10) Pray with thankfulness (Phil. 4.6), including praying for fellow sufferers (Acts 12.5; Hebrews 13.3; Col. 4.18) and our persecutors (Matt. 5.44; Romans 12.14).

11) Refuse to be ashamed. "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter" (1 Peter 4.16, NKJV).

12) Refuse to retaliate – consider Jesus Christ in His passion.

13) Trust God that nothing can separate us from him (Romans 8.31-39) and that God will never allow persecution to become unbearable on a personal level (1 Cor. 10.13).

14) Stand firm together with fellow brothers and sisters. When one part of the Body of Christ suffers, all the other members suffer (1 Cor. 12.20-27).

Conclusion

The Scriptures portray an eschatological remnant that is neither triumphant nor comfortable. Rather, it is the Church militant that survives through to the 2nd Coming, facing overt persecution from external actors, and riven by internal stresses between the wheat and the tares. Nonetheless, Jesus Christ gives a series of beautiful promises to those who stand faithful to the end:

"To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Rev. 2.7, NKJV).

"He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (Rev. 2.11, NKJV).

"To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it" (Rev. 2.17, NKJV).

"And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations -- ²⁷ 'He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels' -- as I also have received from My Father; ²⁸ "and I will give him the morning star" (Rev. 2.26-28, NKJV).

"He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels" (Rev. 3.5, NKJV).

"He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name" (Rev. 3.12, NKJV).

"To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Rev. 3.21, NKJV).

Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!