

ARE YOU PERSECUTED BY CHANCE OR BY CHOICE?

Today's Text: Jn 16: 1- 33

Extracts:

“These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, *the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.... Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. ...These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world”* [Jn 16: 1-3, 20, 33]

In Kenya, East Africa, a Somali-based Islamist extremist sect, al-Shabab, recently threw a grenade into the compound of the East African Pentecostal Church in Garissa, killing two people and injuring several others.¹ The sect claimed that it was a reprisal attack against Kenya for sending troops into Somalia. In Nigeria, another Islamic extremist sect, Boko Haram, attacked government security installations in the north-eastern part of the country. According to Rev. Idi Garba, the Chairman of the Yobe State Chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), eleven churches were destroyed in one small district by the attackers. He added that local Christians there were now in constant fear for their lives and safety, not to talk of freedom of worship.

In the two stories, the attackers were reportedly reacting to government policies which they considered inimical to their interests. So, why were the Christians and churches that are not state institutions attacked? Was it because they happened to be in the places under attack (by chance) or were they being persecuted for their faith (by choice)? In one way or the other, whether it looks obvious or subtle, believers face persecution wherever they find themselves. Is it inevitable or avoidable? In this week's Bible text, Jesus warned His followers that a time will come when whoever kills them will think that he offers God service. Are we in that era right now? How are we going to survive it? Let us find out from this week's study.

¹ Based on “Kenya: Grenade attack on church in Garissa kills two,” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15612162> , 6 November 2011; and Njadvara Musa and Chris Irekamba, “Yobe CAN, Bible Society condemn insecurity, killing,” http://www.nguardiannews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=66953:yobe-can-bible-society-condemn-insecurity-killings&catid=1:national&Itemid=559 ; Wed., 09 November 2011.

1. Background: Is Persecution Avoidable or Inevitable?

There is the story of a ten-year old boy who was fond of studying his father's dictionary for new words with which to bluff his school mates. He came across the word, "persecution," which the dictionary told him was used to describe cruel or unfair treatment meted by a person or group of people to another on account of their beliefs or values. That night, his mother forced him to go and study his books instead of watching his favourite cartoon programme on television. His report to his classmates the following morning was about his "cruel mother" who "persecuted" him the night before on account of his belief in cartoons!

Persecution is, of course, much more serious than that. Anybody or group can be subjected to cruel or unfair treatment by others for many reasons, some of which as follows:

a) *For economic and social reasons*

Human wants are insatiable but the means to satisfy them are limited. Consequently, there is competition among individuals and groups for control of the limited resources for their own exclusive use or benefit. Such competition can be over land or natural resources or political power. The more powerful or more numerous groups may then use their numerical advantages to discriminate against others on the basis, for example, of skin colour (race) or language (ethnicity) or gender or class. We are familiar not long ago with ethnic cleansing in Kosovo (Europe) and Rwanda (Africa). The Jews and the Palestinians are always at loggerheads over the city of Jerusalem. Racial discrimination has hardly been wiped out in America, even with the election of a black President. People will taunt you whether you are tall or short, beautiful or ugly, brilliant or dull. You can never win!

We are familiar with the history of the children of Israel in Egypt after the death of Joseph. A new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph drew his people's attention to the growing numerical strength of the children of Israel and the danger that they posed for Egypt's security. Therefore, "all their service in which [the Egyptians] made [the children of Israel] to serve was with rigour" [Ex. 1: 8-14]. We also remember how Ahab, king of Israel, and his wicked wife, Jezebel, connived to lay false charges against Naboth to get him killed so they could take over his vineyard for a vegetable garden near the palace [1 Kgs 21: 1-16].

b) *For religious reasons*

Sometimes, people are persecuted for religious reasons. It may be inter-religious, such as Muslims against Christians as in the Middle East and Africa or Hindus against Muslims as in Asia. It may also be inter-

denominational, such as Protestants against Catholics in Northern Ireland. In both cases, the issues may be more about political power than faith. For example, some of the targets for persecution may not necessarily be faithful practitioners but just any member or representative of the target group. So, any church would be a target of Islamic extremists even if such a church were being pastored by a gay bishop! Many people who bear Christian names in some societies may not even be Christians at all! Therefore, there may be much more to religious persecution than meets the eye.

c) *For Christ's sake*

The population of Christians worldwide is more than one billion but how many of them are true followers of Christ? That small group faces the most persecution for “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” [2 Tim. 3: 12]. This is the group that Jesus is talking about in this week's Bible text. Their persecution takes many forms, some of which are as follows:

- They are not welcomed in places of worship

Jesus said, “They will be put out of the synagogues” [Jn 16: 2]. The priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees, for example, arrested Peter and John because they were “greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection of the dead” [Acts 4: 1-4]. It may take a more subtle form today in your place of worship. For example, how does your church leader react to anyone who insists on repentance and holy living among the congregation instead of the popular emphasis on material blessings and God's favours? Will they promote or even allow “critics” to serve on church committees? Will every attempt not be made to “encourage” them to leave and worship elsewhere?

- They are martyred

Jesus said, “The time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” [Jn 16: 2]. Those Islamic extremists who destroy churches and kill Christians are so sure of “heaven” when such murderers die because they believe that they are fighting for God! Those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr, to death were happy because they had eliminated a “blasphemer” [Acts 6: 13; 7: 54-59]! When Herod killed James, one of the apostles, he went ahead to put Peter in prison “because he saw that it pleased the Jews” [Acts 12: 1-3].

How many church leaders that you may know have been “martyred” through slander or deliberate false allegations just to “kill” their effective work for Jesus? How often have you yourself been blackmailed before your church leader by faceless people who are simply envious of your spiritual growth and influence? For example, when Daniel’s fellow governors wanted to discredit him before Darius, they knew that “an excellent spirit was in him.” Yet, they knew that they could not frame any charges against him unless they could find one “concerning the law of his God.” They got the king to sign a decree that whoever prayed to any other god or man than the king himself should be thrown into a lions’ den. Daniel could not betray the God of Israel and he continued to pray to Him- and openly too! For that, he was thrown into the lions’ den [Dan. 6: 1-17]. Do you know how many traps your enemies set for you each day in your family, at work or in your place of worship just because you have refused to join their club of immoral or corrupt people?

From the forgoing analysis, we can conclude *that persecution for ethnic and social reasons may be avoidable or may one day come to an end. However, that for Christ’s sake is inevitable and it is something that you cannot avoid. If you do not run into it, it will run into you!* That is why Jesus has assured you, “You will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice, and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. So, if you cannot avoid it, how can you cope so as to reach that point of joy?”

2. How to cope with persecution

Persecution is hard and painful. Look at the litany of what Paul suffered for Christ’s sake. He was in danger of death or imprisonment often. Five times he was whipped, receiving thirty-nine stripes each time. Three times he was beaten with rods and stoned to death once. Three times he was shipwrecked. On numerous occasions, he ran into perils of robbers and other marauders at night or day, in the city or in the wilderness, not to talk of long spells of hunger or sleeplessness [2 Cor. 11: 22-33]. In spite of such persecutions, he was able to do all things through Christ who strengthened him [Phil. 4: 13].

So, how can you cope with the persecutions that you face each day? Here are some coping strategies:

a) *Sometimes, it is better to flee!*

It may be a better strategy to run away than fight, especially if it is in God’s will or He has specifically asked you to run. For example, it was God that instructed Joseph (through an angel in a dream) to take the infant Jesus and His mother Mary to flee to Egypt from Herod’s planned

massacre of children under the age of two in Bethlehem [Matt. 2: 13-18]. It was the same God who had commanded David to go to Keilah to save the people from the Philistines that also told him to leave the walled city before the arrival of King Saul and his troops that were looking for him to kill [1 Sam. 23: 1-13]. When the Jews plotted to kill Paul soon after his conversion at Damascus, the disciples let him down through a large basket at night because his enemies manned all the gates into the city [Acts 9: 23-25].

In all those cases, the affected people still needed to grow their spiritual wings to be able to fulfill the missions that God had planned for them. Therefore, ***do not fight persecution before you are spiritually equipped to do so. Instead, flee to safety!***

b) *Sometimes, it may be better to return home*

Sometimes, your persecution may be self-inflicted. For example, you may be unnecessarily stepping on other people's toes out of your inordinate selfish ambitions and political manipulations. You may be living a lie or a life of sins that may be attracting unpleasant consequences that you are reading as persecution. What do you expect from a husband who has discovered that you are having an adulterous affair with his wife? How do you expect your employers to react when they find out that you are defrauding them? In such cases, persecution is a reaction to your lifestyle that is unacceptable to God.

If you find yourself in such a situation, ***return home like the prodigal son***. After wasting his share of his father's estate on prodigal living, he began to starve and to be in want. He took a job as a swine feeder and could not feed himself from his earnings. That was when he came to himself and decided to go back to his father and ask for his forgiveness [Lk 15: 11-21]. Jeremiah lamented the persecution that the children of Israel suffered in exile in Babylon when he prayed, "Remember, O Lord, what has come upon us; look and behold our reproach! ... Our fathers sinned and are no more, but we bear their iniquities. Servants rule over us; there is none to deliver us from their hand. ... Turn us back to You, O Lord, and we will be restored; renew our days as of old" [Lam. 5: 1, 7-8, 21]. ***You may have backslidden but the time to repent and return to your heavenly Father is now. Every sin has its consequences but you are persecuting yourself if you refuse to return home.***

c) *Sometimes, you have no choice but to be a crusader*

When you are spiritually strong and you have nowhere to go but to defend your faith, you can play the crusader. You can stand and hold your ground against all the whirls of the enemy, knowing that the gates of hell cannot

prevail against the church of Christ [**Matt. 16:18**]. For example, when Paul first came to Jerusalem from Damascus, Jesus said to him in a trance, “Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.” As Paul reminded Him of his past record, especially in holding the robes of those that killed Stephen and how that could make him unwanted among other believers, Jesus said to him, ”Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles” [**Acts 22: 17-21**]. That is the strategy of coping by running away. However, at Paul’s old age, when he returned and the Jews plotted to kill him, the Lord stood by him one night and said to him, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome”[**Acts 23: 11**]. *Paul had stopped running. He had become a crusader! You can also do likewise. But you could lose your life or reputation in the process. It does not matter because life without Jesus is a wasted one!*

3. Conclusion: Be of good cheer!

Jesus is the difference between Christianity and all other religions. Remove Christ and there will be a one-world religion. That is why there should be no half measure in your faith in Him, come rain or shine. Jesus has assured His followers, “In Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world” [**Jn 16: 33**].

You have already won the war; let persecution of any kind not tell you otherwise. You are only seeing the skirmishes and mopping up operations of Christ’s troops against Satan and his wicked forces who were roundly trounced at Calvary two thousand years ago. So, it is already and long over. Be of good cheer!