



Moving Towards a Biblical Understanding of Persecution

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Introduction

Right now at this moment millions of Christians across the earth face varying degrees of persecution, just as it has been since the beginning. When Christianity originally began to spread, it did not take long for the first followers of Jesus to face persecution and opposition. While we sometimes like to think of the modern era as being “more civilized” when it comes to the experience of Christians around the earth, in fact the opposite is true. According to some, more Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in all previous centuries combined. While this was due in part to the fact that the worldwide population was much larger in the twentieth century, it was also a difficult century for much of the Church around the world.

Many Christians have enjoyed relative freedom in Western nations for the last few centuries, but historically and globally this is an enigma. For the vast majority of history, in the vast majority of places, evangelical Christianity has been at least discriminated against, and, in many areas, it has been actively persecuted. Even in the Western world, where Christianity has been tolerated and in some way celebrated, there is a shift underway to marginalize and discriminate against Christians as the culture becomes distinctly post-Christian. Beyond the Western world, Christianity is facing a fresh wave of opposition and persecution in many places, often energized by radical Islam.

The center point for this fresh wave of aggressive persecution is the Middle East. While ISIS may seem to be the chief protagonist, radical Islam in all its various shapes and forms has created a context of discrimination and hostility against Christianity throughout the region. For those in ministry in the Middle East, persecution is becoming a factor they must contend with.

For the indigenous Christian population, the reality of persecution is even more dire. Statistics vary somewhat, but according to the work of Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo with the Center for Study of Global Christianity, the Middle East has gone from being 13.6 percent Christian in 1910 to 4.2 percent in 2010, and it is still dropping.¹ Some are already saying that the Middle East is only 2 percent Christian, with many talking about the near extinction of Christianity in countries like Iraq.

¹ “Amid killings and kidnappings, can Christianity survive in the Middle East?” CNN, last modified February 27, 2015, accessed June 15, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/27/middleeast/christianity-middle-east/>.

We are simultaneously seeing the largest refugee crisis in the Middle East since World War II, a crisis that is predominantly due to religious conflict. And Christians are the one refugee group with virtually no political advocate in the region.

Christianity stands alone in world religions as being the weakest and most oppressed at its source of origin. Islam remains strongest in the place it was born. Hinduism and Buddhism also remain most entrenched where they began. However, Christianity, which first took root in the Middle East, now faces a struggle to even survive there. As the global Church, we are called to stand with believers and workers who are laboring in the lands where Paul first planted churches and where Christianity first expanded beyond Jerusalem.

While Middle Eastern believers are not alone in facing persecution, and Islam is not the only violent oppressor, it is imperative that we are neither ignorant, silent, nor uninvolved. If we do not stand up and serve the least of these in this hour, we will have to answer to the Lord. Most of the Western Christian world seems either uninformed or paralyzed by events in the Middle East. We would do well to remember the words of Martin Niemöller:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Socialist.
 en they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out— Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
 Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.²*

Increasing persecution is not just a reality in the Middle East, it is a reality for global Christianity. For those who live in a community that is not experiencing persecution, there is no guarantee that this will continue—this is our time to stand with our brethren and obey the instructions of Hebrews 13:3.

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. (Hebrews 13:3)

² “Martin Niemöller: First They Came for the Socialists...,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified June 20, 2014, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>.

To successfully engage in what God is doing in the Middle East and other hard places, we must begin by making sure we have a robust theology of persecution and suffering. In some parts of the Church, the idea of suffering is rejected in favor of a “prosperity” gospel that believes that we are protected and preserved from suffering and loss in this age. Such a gospel will not hold up either under biblical scrutiny or under the experience of most of the saints throughout the ages. This theology often prevents the Church from standing with suffering believers. Furthermore, those who adhere to this theology are likely to fall away when suffering becomes a part of their own experience as Christians.

Our theology of persecution must be able to stand up to the following questions:

- Is suffering normal for Christians?
- How does God feel about suffering Christians?
- Is there a purpose in suffering?
- How should the global Church relate to suffering believers?
- How do we send and train workers to the field in the midst of increasing persecution?
- How does the gospel expand in the midst of persecution?

The term persecution is often used to describe a broad spectrum of resistance to the gospel. For our purposes, however, we are primarily focusing on persecution that involves physical suffering for the sake of the gospel. We will also use the term suffering to describe suffering for the sake of the gospel (as opposed to suffering caused by natural disasters, indiscriminate poverty, and so on), because it is the term that the New Testament most often uses to describe persecution. Therefore, in this book, the term suffering may be used almost synonymously with persecution.

While the Church in this generation is facing unparalleled challenges in terms of the sheer numbers of people affected by violent resistance to the gospel, the good news is that the gospel is strong enough to answer the question of how we respond and endure.

We also have the testimony of thousands of years of suffering believers who successfully withstood the persecutors of their generation. The witness of Scripture and of history tells us that God releases the power of His

Holy Spirit to His people to enable those who suffer to stay faithful and receive a reward that will never fade.

The Experience of Persecution in Scripture

If we have not personally experienced persecution, we can tend to see it as an abnormality in the Christian life. But when we look carefully at the Word of God we find something very different. We see that the people of God throughout Scripture regularly experienced opposition and persecution.

Suffering in the Old Testament

Nearly all the key figures of the Old Testament endured some sort of opposition as they sought to follow the will of God. The opposition took various forms—from opposition to their ministry to physical persecution to a violent death. Men like Abel, Joseph, Moses, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel are just a few from the Old Testament who suffered persecution. In the centuries before Christ, persecution came both from pagan nations and from within the nation of Israel itself, and it seemed to be the norm for those who embraced the call of God.

The author of Hebrews summarizes the lives of key individuals in the Old Testament:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (Hebrews 11:32–38)

The leaders and prophets of Israel achieved much through faith, but we are reminded that many suffered terribly. Persecution was a normal part of the experience of the people of God in the Old Testament.

Suffering in the New Testament

We should not be surprised to find that the experience of the people of God in the New Testament is very similar to that of the saints in the Old Testament. The New Testament begins with the story of Jesus. The Son of

God came to His own people and experienced suffering and a gruesome death in response to His message. He was rejected by Jews and Gentiles alike. In the wisdom of God, Jesus' suffering became the means of salvation and atonement, but it also became a pattern for the people of God in the New Testament.

As we follow the story of God in the book of Acts, we see the early church consistently experiencing seasons of trouble and persecution. It seems that no sooner had the gospel taken root in an area, than opposition rose up against the disciples. Peter and John were arrested and imprisoned almost immediately the gospel began to spread in Jerusalem. James and Stephen were executed as the number of believers increased rapidly.

The book of Acts, recounting Paul's missionary exploits, tells of the beatings and imprisonments he suffered for the sake of the gospel. In cities where he did not actually experience persecution, he faced the threat of it. For example, in Ephesus, Paul was not imprisoned, but a riot that ensued from the success of the gospel threatened to take his life (Acts 19:23–31).

Paul's letters frequently mention suffering for the gospel, indicating that it was a reality for Paul and for the emerging church. Peter wrote a letter specifically to encourage suffering believers. The task of recording the final book of the New Testament, Revelation, was given to John while he was imprisoned on an island for the sake of the gospel. Revelation warns that the Church will face opposition until the end of the age. In his visions, John is shown both the rage that will come against the Church and the faithfulness of believers in the face of martyrdom.

A survey of God's people throughout the Bible reveals that opposition, persecution, and suffering are the biblical norm. The believing community in both testaments consistently faced opposition. Based simply on the narrative of the Bible we can come to expect persecution anywhere the gospel begins to take root. In fact, persecution was such a common experience in the early church that it is a prominent topic in the New Testament. To gain a correct understanding of suffering and persecution, we need to look deeper and consider the words of Jesus and the apostles regarding suffering.

The Early Church's Expectation of Suffering

Not only was persecution part of the normal experience of the people of God in the New Testament, but it was also part of their expectation. They did not wonder if they would face persecution; they expected it and

endured it. It does not mean it was easy for them, or that they did not face real difficulty, but they were not surprised by it. Both Jesus and the apostles taught the early church to expect persecution.

Jesus' Prediction of Suffering for His People

Jesus Himself endured intense suffering, but He also prepared His disciples to face persecution. He openly and repeatedly warned that anyone who followed Him would face resistance.

Jesus warned the disciples that they would experience discrimination and difficult family dynamics as a result of following Him.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matthew 10:34–39)

Here, Jesus states that the gospel will be divisive. People who follow Him will find enemies in their own household, and for many it will cost them family relationships. His warning is clear and bold as He challenges His followers to recognize that they must be prepared to love Him more than they love their own families. In His kindness, Jesus entreated potential followers to wrestle with the cost of following Him before they made their decision. Many in His audience would need courage to follow Him; they would face discrimination, be disowned by their families, and even endure physical violence.

Jesus frequently called on those who would follow Him to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34). He even told His disciples that “whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:38).

In speaking of the cost that His followers should expect, Jesus used the analogy of taking up an instrument of execution. Those who would be disciples must be prepared even for execution for their allegiance to Jesus. His words were difficult, even shocking, but Jesus felt the strength of the resistance against Him and knew that the faith of His followers would be tested at the deepest level. The spiritual darkness that drove Jesus’ own enemies to call for His crucifixion would not weaken a single hair of Jesus’ death, but

would continue in an attempt to wipe out the witness and proclamation of who Jesus is.

Followers of Jesus would encounter the same opposition that He did. It is why Jesus repeatedly warned His followers of things they would suffer: they would “be dragged before governors and kings” (Matthew 10:18), delivered up to tribulation, put to death, and “hated by all nations” for His name’s sake (Matthew 24:9). Jesus was abundantly clear about the motivation of the persecutors: “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God” (John 16:2).

Then he explains why believers should expect persecution:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.” (John 15:18–21)

It is for His name’s sake. In the same way the nations resist the gospel and the person of Jesus, they will resist His people. It means that suffering for the sake of the gospel is a holy thing. It is not simply trouble or difficulty, but a form of fully identifying with Jesus in the way that He was treated by His enemies.

In Revelation chapters 4 and 5, John experiences one of the most dramatic revelations of the glory of Jesus. In the vision, John is caught up to the throne room of God and experiences the majesty of God. He witnesses the response of heaven, as elders, angels, and others cry out in songs of adoration and praise to God. In the midst of this glorious vision, John sees something shocking. As he struggles to look at the One upon the throne, he sees what he describes as a Lamb slain.

“And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain. (Revelation 5:6)

We would have expected John to see God in all His power and might and sovereignty, but the most notable expression of God’s nature that John sees is the mark of His suffering. Though His suffering is uniquely redemptive, He is forever marked by His suffering, and it naturally follows that many of

His people will share a similar mark and also suffer for the sake of His name.

As difficult and traumatic as suffering is, it draws us in to identification with Jesus, the One who suffered the most, and on our behalf. Persecution is a statement of the authenticity of the people of God. When the nations rage against Jesus' followers they are actually conferring a great dignity on the people of God in treating them the same way they treated the Son of God. According to Jesus, persecution comes "for His sake." We are not persecuted because of our own life, but as a result of rage against Jesus, which opposes anyone who demonstrates and declares Jesus on this earth. And why did Jesus forewarn His followers? "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away" (John 16:1), "that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you" (John 16:4).

Jesus was tenderly concerned for those who would follow Him, wanting them to be prepared for the rage that would come against them so that they would not fall away. He wanted them to count the cost of following Him so that they would remain faithful.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26–33)

When Jesus spoke to Ananias in the book of Acts about Paul's apostolic call, he gave him a similar word of warning:

But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:15–16)

The great apostle Paul had been chosen to make known the name of Jesus to many and would suffer for the sake of Jesus' name.

Jesus did not avoid the subject of suffering. He gave the strongest warning possible that anyone who aligns themselves with Him should expect to be treated in the way He was treated. In the sovereignty of God, not every believer faces the same level of suffering or persecution, but Jesus is very clear that we should expect it and consider it before we decide to follow Him.

The Apostles' Expectation of Suffering

The apostles took Jesus' words to heart, and in their writing and experience they had an expectation of suffering as something that would be normal for those who followed Jesus.

In the book of Acts, persecution comes almost immediately, in chapter 4, when Peter and John face the threats of the authorities for their proclamation of Jesus and for a miracle performed in His name. In Acts 5, we find their response to the first wave of persecution:

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. (Acts 5:41)

Peter and John understood that they were being persecuted for the sake of Jesus' name. They counted it an honor that those who were against Jesus so identified them with Jesus that they were worthy of suffering and dishonor. Their response is not meant to make light of the very real difficulties associated with suffering, but it reveals two convictions that the apostles held regarding suffering:

- They expected suffering, were not surprised by it, and did not see it as unusual.
- The process of suffering conferred honor and dignity on them, because it was as a result of their identification with Jesus.

In their letters, the authors of the New Testament continued to treat suffering as a normal part of Christian experience. They referred to it in a very matter-of-fact way as part of following Jesus.

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. (Acts 11:19)

Neither did they shrink back from speaking about Jesus, but continued to spread the word of the Lord further and further afield, being filled with joy in

God. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:49–52)

In all our affliction, I am over-joyed. For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. (2 Corinthians 7:4–5)

Just as Jesus had told Ananias that Paul would suffer for His name, Paul wrote to newly established fellowships of believers that they were also appointed to suffer for the sake of Jesus and that he himself continued to experience much conflict in declaring the gospel.

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now bear that I still have. (Philippians 1:29–30)

Though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. (1 Thessalonians 2:1–2)

For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews. (1 Thessalonians 2:14)

The apostles exhorted and encouraged believers to remain faithful and endure in the midst of affliction.

We sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. (1 Thessalonians 3:1–4)

Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring. (2 Thessalonians 1:4)

For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. (1 Peter 2:19)

Paul encouraged the saints to follow the example of Jesus and be willing to embrace suffering for the sake of Jesus, even as he was enabled to rejoice in his own sufferings for the sake of knowing Christ.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:4–8)

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8–11)

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. (Col. 1:24)

The early church also experienced the power of God in the middle of persecution. They were human just like us, and the suffering they experienced could have overwhelmed their human strength, but they found that God was with them in the midst of their suffering, and He enabled them to endure. The life and power of Jesus were uniquely demonstrated through those who endured persecution for the sake of His name.

Paul had an unwavering, eternal hope and was anchored in the truth. e following passages show that his purpose was to display the glory and power of God in the midst of his own weakness.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. (2 Corinthians 1:8–10)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;

perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4:7–10)

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord . . . but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God . . . which He gave us in Christ Jesus . . . who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. (2 Timothy 1:8–12)

Paul also saw suffering as a mark of the authenticity of his apostolic ministry, commending himself to the Corinthians through his weakness.

But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything. (2 Corinthians 6:4–10)

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (2 Corinthians 11:23–30)

Rather than hiding the difficulty of his ministry, Paul “boasted” of things that revealed his weakness. This is a key insight into the suffering of Paul and the apostles—they were not stronger than us; they were men just like us (James 5:17), and suffering exposed their weakness. Yet in the midst of their

weakness they found divine strength. But the weakness was real, and the suffering was difficult.

Toward the end of his life, Paul wrote two tender letters to Timothy, who had been his trusted companion and a spiritual son. Paul had deeply invested himself in Timothy, and these letters reveal what was on Paul's heart as he was coming to the end of his life and passing the baton to Timothy. We feel Paul's emotions as he considers the suffering that Timothy will have to lead the churches through and shares with Timothy the way a father shares with a son from the experience of his own suffering.

Paul's own life was a testimony that suffering can be endured—the people of God can triumph in the midst of opposition—and Paul was zealous to see Timothy finish well, urging him to “share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3).

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! (2 Timothy 2:8–9)

You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Timothy 3:10–12)

As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:5)

The prominence of the topic of suffering in Paul's short letter to Timothy indicates that he saw suffering as one of the most significant challenges that a next-generation leader would have to lead the flock through. Paul recognized the pressure it would bring and did not want Timothy to give up in the face of persecution.

Like Paul, Peter felt a pastoral burden for the churches on the issue of suffering, which is one of the major themes in his first letter. Peter assured the brethren that persecution is normal: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12). He wanted to give hope and vision to a people who were experiencing hardship and were perhaps tempted to despair: “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name” (1 Peter 4:16).

Reassuring them that God had not forgotten them, that they had done nothing wrong, but were experiencing the reality of God's enemy, Peter wrote:

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. (1 Peter 5:8–9)

In the apostle John's record of the revelation of God, those who lose their lives for the sake of Jesus are given a prominent place. The following passages from Revelation speak of the faithfulness of believers who paid the ultimate cost for their faith with their lives, but also emphasize their glorious destiny in God.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:9–10)

One of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:13–17)

When they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. (Revelation 11:7–8)

They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. (Revelation 12:11)

If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. (Revelation 13:10)

I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly. (Revelation 17:6)

“His judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” (Revelation 19:2)

I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4)

The book of Revelation communicates powerful truths about persecution:

- Persecution will continue to the end. Martyrdom is part of the Church’s experience, even in the final hours of this age. It will be one of the Church’s challenges all the way to the end.
- The Church will remain faithful through martyrdom. Even the most demonized man in history cannot overcome the Church. The Church will choose death over disloyalty to Jesus. Martyrdom is part of God’s victory over the enemy.
- God is deeply moved by those who lose their lives for Jesus’ sake. Heaven gives them a place of great honor. Their cries are heard; their sacrifice is rewarded.

When we survey the sweep of the New Testament we see frequent and prominent mention of persecution. It is one of the pastoral themes the apostles repeatedly referred to, which indicates how prevalent it was in first-century Christianity.

By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Scripture prepares us for what the Church will face. The Spirit chose to highlight suffering and persecution as something that is normal for the Church. He also wanted us to know that the Church can survive, even thrive, in the midst of opposition. The Word of God establishes the reality of persecution, but it also tells us how to understand, respond to, and endure persecution.

The Biblical Paradigm of Suffering

In the previous chapter we summarized the actuality of persecution for the people of God throughout Scripture. We established that it was common in the Old Testament, predicted by Jesus, and prominent in the New Testament. But in light of the immense pressure of persecution, Scripture goes further, giving us a biblical paradigm of how we are to view persecution and suffering.

In order to shepherd the Church through persecution, we need to be familiar with this paradigm and the apostles' teaching on how to respond, survive, and thrive in persecution.

The Source of Persecution

To correctly understand persecution, it is imperative that we understand the source of persecution and why the people of God are persecuted. Jesus taught that persecution was the natural result of identification with Him. He was persecuted, and if we are like Him, we should expect to be treated in the way that He was.

This is why the apostles rejoiced when suffering first came to them for the proclamation of the gospel—it was a statement that they resembled Jesus. It gives deep dignity to the gruesome reality of persecution. It is a sign that we belong to Him; therefore we suffer for the sake of His name, not our own. Luke tells us that “they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (Acts 5:41).

“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.” (John 15:20–21)

The New Testament also teaches that persecution is intensely spiritual—it is a physical expression of a spiritual battle. Paul taught the Corinthians that our true persecutors are not the people who oppose us, but the powers and principalities of this age: “For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh” (2 Corinthians 10:3).

He also explained in his letter to the Ephesians:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12)

Understanding that we are dealing with unseen powers gives us perspective for what is happening when we or others suffer. It explains the rage and the hatred that believers experience from their persecutors. Their rage seems almost supernatural, precisely because it is. When we suffer persecution we are experiencing the darkness of this age.

When we realize that the source of our oppression is not other human beings, but the powers and principalities of this age, it helps us to open our hearts to share the gospel with our persecutors. They seem fierce, but they are actually in chains.

In fact, the preeminent missionary in the New Testament was formerly a persecutor of God's people. In this, we recognize the potential of redemption and transformation for the darkest heart. It poses an immense challenge for those who suffer, but seeing our human oppressor as a slave of darkness reminds us that even our persecutors need the gospel.

Saul, who had presided over Stephen's martyrdom, was called by God as a great apostle and teacher. At first, believers in Judea who had suffered persecution at the hands of Saul were wary of him. They heard from afar that "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" (Gal. 1:23).

Paul later wrote of his great thankfulness to God for His abounding grace toward him even though he had been a strong opponent of the gospel:

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overabounded for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 1:12–14)

God's Emotions on Behalf of the Persecuted

One of the deepest questions to surface in the midst of suffering is: where is God? In the agony of our condition we naturally wonder where God is and how He feels about our suffering. We may know mentally or theologically that God is aware of our pain, but our heart longs for something more. We desire the deep assurance that God really sees our suffering and is moved by it. We need to know that He has real emotions toward His people when they suffer.

Scripture assures us that God is deeply moved by our suffering and that He is present in the midst of it. When Daniel's friends were thrown into the fiery furnace God appeared in their midst.

And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.” (Daniel 3:23–25)

When Daniel was thrown into the lion’s den, an angel stood by him:

“My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm.” (Daniel 6:22)

Peter was delivered from death when an angel escorted him out of prison.

Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, “Get up quickly.” And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” (Acts 12:6–8)

God’s faithfulness to deliver His people throughout Scripture gives us great hope, but it is not the entire story. In other situations no deliverance comes, and persecution continues. It is in those times that we need to know most of all that God is with His people and moved by their plight.

Just before Peter was supernaturally delivered from prison, James was executed (Acts 12:1–2). It is easy to believe that God is moved when deliverance comes, but what about when it does not? Thankfully, the New Testament answers this question for us. And the psalmist reminds us: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15).

During his execution, Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father. God did not deliver Stephen; he endured the agony of being stoned to death, and yet he died with confidence that God was with him even in his execution. His heart was at peace, and his last words were words of forgiveness for his executors.

The Biblical Paradigm of Suffering

And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep. (Acts 7:56–60)

During Paul's imprisonment in Jerusalem and on his subsequent journey to Rome as a prisoner, he was visited by the Lord and by an angel. In each case, Paul received a message that gave dignity to his suffering. The Lord had given him a promise that he would stand before the Gentiles and kings, and, in the sovereignty of God, his imprisonment put him in a place where he would stand and witness to kings. Paul was not delivered on either occasion, but the Lord and the angel who visited him reminded him that there was purpose to his suffering. His chains were part of God's plan, and God was with him.

Paul tells thus of how the Lord appeared to him in prison to strengthen him:

And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks. The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome. (Acts 23:10–11)

Under guard, in the company of other prisoners, Paul set sail across the Mediterranean headed for Italy. When the ship encountered terrible storms and all the men feared for their lives, Paul told of the angel who had appeared to him:

"I urge you to take heart, for this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.'" (Acts 27:23–24)

In the book of Revelation, God showed John the souls of those who had lost their lives for Jesus crying out for God's righteous judgment. Those who have been killed are dear to God. The Lord wants John to have confidence that He hears the cry of the oppressed and the martyred. Their

prayers move Him deeply and will be answered. A future day is appointed when God will come in judgment and respond to the mistreatment of His people.

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. (Revelation 6:9–11)

John also saw a vision of God's tender care for those who suffered in the great tribulation. Again, the Lord wanted John to have confidence that He cares deeply for those who endure mistreatment for the sake of His name. One of the twenty-four elders around the throne in heaven explained to John:

"These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:14–17)

In Romans 8, Paul, knowing from personal experience that the trauma of suffering can cause us to feel that God is no longer with us, states emphatically that there is no trial that can separate us from the love of Christ.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35–39)

Paul is very clear. God is deeply moved by the suffering of His people, and this is an anchor for our souls. Jesus' suffering on the cross did not separate Him from the love of the Father even when He felt the agony of being

forsaken by His Father. Paul assures us that any emotion that contradicts the ever-present love of God does not represent reality. Even in the agony of our suffering, God's deep love is present. Paul even mentions the horror of God's people being "killed all day long," because he wants to anchor them in God's emotions, even when they are experiencing the most horrific persecution.

Being anchored in God's emotions for His suffering people is one of the greatest needs of believers who endure hardship for the sake of Christ.

Suffering Is Not Meaningless

Not only do we need to be anchored in God's emotions regarding suffering, we also need to recognize what the Bible says about the dignity of our suffering. According to the Word, suffering is not meaningless; it has deep meaning and purpose, as God is able to use something horrific to bring about something good. As Paul told the church in Corinth, our momentary affliction will produce an eternal reward.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:16–18)

No matter what we walk through, the promise of God is that He will use our affliction to produce something glorious. Even the worst trials are to be considered a "momentary affliction" compared to what they will produce for us. Those who suffer will receive an eternal weight of glory from the Lord. Suffering is transient and temporal. Our reward, though unseen in this age, is eternal in the age to come. When we have eyes to see what is temporal and what is eternal, we will not lose heart.

In Paul's final letter to Timothy, he shares the secret to enduring suffering—remember Jesus, who rose from the dead.

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us. (2 Timothy 2:8–12)

Jesus suffered all the way to death on the cross, and His destiny seemed lost. His followers were in hiding. His story seemed finished, but it was not the end.

The gospel is not only the story of Jesus crucified, but of His resurrection from the dead. Just when everyone thought Jesus had been defeated, the power of God transformed His suffering into triumph and the fulfillment of His eternal destiny (Philippians 2:8–11).

Similarly, Paul reminded Timothy that though the world saw him bound in chains, the power of God’s Word was not bound. If we die in Christ, we shall also live with Him (2 Timothy 2: 11). As Paul says in Romans, Jesus has become the “firstborn among many brothers,” and we will follow the same path that Jesus did. Though we are bound, though we die, we will truly live. If we endure suffering for His name, we will also reign with Him. He will exalt us and reward us for our suffering.

is is the true and eternal perspective of our suffering in this age, and the Church must have this perspective in order to endure. Suffering matters. It produces for us an eternal reward, an inheritance in the age to come. Suffering produces hope, and we rejoice in the hope of the age to come.

Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:2–5)

Our suffering prepares us for great glory, and is not even worthy to be compared to the suffering that we endure. No matter how terrible the suffering, the Word promises that God will reward those who suffer with an incomparable glory, something far greater than the affliction they endure. As Jesus was crowned with great glory through the process of His suffering, so our suffering will result in glory. As God was faithful to reward Jesus, so also He will reward us. Jesus is the pattern, not only for enduring suffering, but also for receiving great reward for our suffering.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God. (2 Timothy 1:8)

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ,

provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Romans 8:16–18)

We cannot conceive of the glory God has bestowed on Jesus, the man who obediently suffered. Neither can we imagine the glory God will bestow on His people as a reward for their suffering. God is not unjust to overlook the labor of our soul (Hebrews 6:10). The key lies in recognizing that God is preparing us to rule and reign with Him in the age to come. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, this world is not our home, and this age is not our future.

“So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” (Hebrews 13:12–14)

So the true purpose of this life is not to bring complete fulfillment, but rather to prepare us to be with Jesus forever. We see then that our trials are preparing us to rule and reign alongside the One who was crucified. The Church that endures suffering embodies a message to this age that there is something greater, something far better than this present age.

The great saints before us all lived in this way. That is why Hebrews 11 tells us that we are called to live as pilgrims who endure suffering when it comes. We are to imitate the giants of the faith and set our focus on a city to come and a future reward.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation . . . By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith . . . By faith he [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God . . . These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth . . . If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city . . . And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised. (Hebrews 11:1–2, 7, 9–10, 13–16, 39)

God is “not ashamed” to be called the God of those who suffer, because their focus is set on a future reward. God is preparing a city, a place of dwelling, for those who have no inheritance in this age but seek their inheritance in God. For those who suffer, Hebrews 11:16 is a precious promise: God identifies with those who are suffering. He is proud to be named with them and is preparing a city for them. This is why Paul tells us that we see “through a mirror dimly.” We do not see things as they truly are (1 Corinthians 13:12). As John wrote, we have not yet seen what we will become when our suffering has ended.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (1 John 3:2–3)

This hope gives us strength to endure, because we know that when we see Him we will be like Him. We will be clothed in garments of glory as He is, and those garments are prepared in part by the sufferings of this age. Just as Jesus' suffering taught Him obedience and made Him perfect, so it will do the same for us.

It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. (Hebrews 2:10)

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. (Hebrews 5:7–9)

We can live in the confidence that no matter what we endure, we have an indestructible inheritance in the heavens that cannot be taken away. No matter what is lost in this age, even life itself, it cannot threaten what we have in God. As the New Testament authors wrote of God preparing a glorious salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (2 Thessalonians 1:5–8)

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, some- times being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. (Hebrews 10:32–34)

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3–5)

Jesus spoke directly to the church in Smyrna, promising that He saw their suffering and would reward it.

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10)

Peter encouraged the believers in his first letter that suffering is temporary and yields a precious reward.

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. (1 Peter 4:12–14)

Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (1 Peter 4:19)

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. (1 Peter 5:10)

The power of our eternal hope is God's answer to the pain of persecution. When trouble comes our heart cries out in agony to know that God is near, that He sees, and that He will act on our behalf. e consistent testimony of Scripture is that God does see and He will act, both in great reward for those who suffer and in judgment for those who do not repent.

The Difficulty of Suffering

A biblical paradigm of suffering must also recognize the difficulty and trauma of suffering. Suffering prepares the way for the Church to demonstrate God's power and extravagant love for Jesus, but there is also tremendous pain and the possibility of failure in times of suffering. The truth of Scripture is our anchor and hope, but there are times when persecution—and the threat of persecution—can seem overwhelming. The Bible does not shy away from this, and neither should we.

One of the best known episodes in Peter's life is his denial of Jesus. Peter had been used powerfully during Jesus' ministry on earth; he was one of the apostles, even one of Jesus' inner circle. But under pressure, he gave in. He had been brimming with confidence that he was ready to die for Jesus, but in a moment of fear and weakness, he denied the faith.

Peter answered him, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." Peter said to him, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!" (Matthew 26:33–35)

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. And a servant girl came up to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean." But he denied it before them all, saying, "I do not know what you mean." And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth." And again he denied it with an oath: "I do not know the man." After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately the rooster crowed. And Peter remembered the saying of Jesus, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:69–75)

It is hard to imagine the humiliation and pain that must have flooded Peter's heart. He was not a casual follower of Jesus, but had given up much to follow his Master. He had experienced precious and intimate things with Jesus, like the transfiguration, when he saw a glimpse of Jesus' glory. Jesus had made a significant investment in Peter, but all of this was not enough to keep Peter in the moment of trial. While it is true that Peter had not yet received the power of the Holy Spirit to enable him to endure, this episode in Peter's life remains as an example of the difficulty of remaining faithful in persecution.

Peter's story could have been disastrous, but instead it ends up demonstrating the posture of God's heart toward those who suffer. When

Peter declared that he was willing to suffer even unto death, Jesus warned Peter that he was not yet ready for that. Jesus was aware of Peter's progress in grace and of what the threat of suffering would do to him. Jesus' tender words to Peter reveal God's understanding of the challenge that suffering poses for the human frame.

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31–32)

Jesus' response to Peter's weakness was to pray for him. But He prayed knowing that Peter would fail. In telling him to strengthen his brothers, Jesus gave Peter hope that his failure would not be the end, but would serve to strengthen the brethren. Jesus was completely aware of Peter's weakness and imminent failure, yet even though Jesus was approaching His own agonizing death, He took time to pray for Peter and encourage him to not give up. Jesus wanted to make sure Peter's faith would not fail.

Although Peter failed this test of suffering and denied knowing Jesus three times, God could redeem him. It is nearly impossible to sense the shame and humiliation that Peter must have experienced as he denied Jesus. I imagine that his words haunted him night and day, and that he replayed the scene in his mind a thousand times, remembering his arrogant reply to Jesus' warning.

Jesus' words to Peter before his failure were powerful, but His actions as Peter's denial were even more powerful. Jesus took Peter aside and reinstated him as a member of the community. Their interchange was tender as Jesus led Peter through three affirmations of his love for Jesus to wash away his guilt over his three denials.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go." (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, "Follow me." (John 21:15–19)

Jesus acknowledges the difficulty of suffering and offers redemption for those who fail. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter finished his race well. The same Peter who denied the Lord in Jesus' most vulnerable hour rejoiced in Acts 5:41 that he was worthy to suffer for the sake of His name; he called on those who had agreed to Jesus' execution to repent. Suffering is difficult. Those who truly love the Lord may be overwhelmed at times, but it is not the end of the story.

Some commentators believe that suffering, or difficulty, was a factor in Mark's decision to withdraw from Paul and Barnabas' missionary team (Acts 13:13). Mark started out with them, but later left the team. This became a significant issue when Paul began his next missionary journey in Acts 15. Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them again, but Paul refused because of what had happened in the previous missionary journey, creating a sharp disagreement between the two and breaking up their team. Paul selected another partner and Barnabas continued with Mark. We cannot be completely certain what happened on that first missionary journey, but it is possible that the difficulty of the work had caused Mark to draw back on the first trip.

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. (Acts 15:37–40)

Like Peter's story, Mark's also has a positive outcome. Whatever the issue that caused Paul to feel that Mark was a liability, Mark continued to grow and mature. He did not fall away from the faith; no doubt his cousin Barnabas invested much in him and helped him to mature. Toward the end of Paul's life, he had a completely different attitude toward Mark. He wrote to Timothy specifically asking for Mark: "Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11).

Suffering will challenge the Church, and we do well to recognize that some who do not respond well to suffering can still become pillars in the Church later in life and strengthen the Church.

We have looked at numerous verses that give us a biblical paradigm for suffering. We have seen the biblical prediction that suffering is normal, and the promise that it produces a great reward. But we also understand that persecution is traumatic and can expose the weakness of our humanity.

Individuals experience things that the human frame was never intended to experience. The terror and trauma of persecution is real, and at times believers really do fail under the pressure of it. Some are restored and strengthened like Peter. Some never come back. We have established that those who suffer need a biblical paradigm of suffering, but suffering is far more than a mental experience, and something deeper than words is also needed—deep heart ministry from the Church and the work of the Holy Spirit upon their hearts.

The Church must minister to those who are traumatized and those who have failed to maintain their witness under persecution. The ministry of Jesus to Peter should be our model for all who feel like they are failing under the test of suffering.

As more and more believers are affected by suffering, a greater number will feel that they have failed God. We need to be prepared to minister to and encourage them with the truth of the gospel and invite them to finish well in faithfulness to God.

A Balanced Approach

Suffering was an expected part of Christian life in the New Testament, and we see that persecution did not mean that the advance of the gospel should stop or that believers should retreat. However, the New Testament also presents a balanced approach to suffering. When a believing community is suffering persecution, it is important to follow the wisdom of God for how to best advance the gospel and minister to those under pressure.

Jesus told his disciples to move from town to town in their evangelistic ministry when they experienced persecution: “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Matthew 10:23).

Paul and his missionary team sometimes moved on from a city when persecution broke out against them.

But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd . . . The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. (Acts 17:5, 10)

Having studied passages of Scripture where believers were encouraged to endure the persecution they experienced, we must also acknowledge that at other times the church leaders did more than endure. They made decisions for the advance of the gospel that sometimes meant moving on from a

situation that involved intense persecution, so that the gospel could be spread. Paul's missionary labors involved both approaches—suffering for the sake of the gospel and, at times, moving on from a situation involving persecution. Both responses to persecution are valid in the work of God.

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. (Acts 9:23–25)

There [Greece] he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. (Acts 20:3)

In Ephesus, Paul's companions refused to let him address an angry crowd because they thought the sight of Paul would enrage the mob and lead to his death.

So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him. And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. (Acts 19:29–31)

The Bible tells us that Paul both endured suffering and avoided it. In each case, he chose what was right to advance the mission of God, by the inspiration of the Spirit. Sometimes other believers took action to preserve his life. It is essential to recognize that action that avoids persecution can be a godly response. Otherwise, we can unintentionally create a theology that exalts martyrdom and suffering as the ultimate expression of Christianity. While it is true that persecution was widespread in the lives of New Testament believers, martyrdom and suffering are not the ultimate goal of Christian living. We must be careful to make faithfulness our goal. Faithfulness to the gospel can, and often does, include suffering, but staying faithful and loyal to Jesus is our primary focus.

Paul's Apostolic Paradigm

In Acts 21 we have an opportunity to look into the heart of the apostle Paul and his value system. We have already seen that in some situations Paul avoided imprisonment and suffering. At times he altered his travel plans in order to continue to be faithful to the call of God on his life. In Acts 21, however, something very different happened. Paul was traveling back to

Jerusalem, and just before he began the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem, he received a prophetic word from Agabus.

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" (Acts 21:10–11)

Agabus warned Paul that he would face imprisonment in Jerusalem and be handed over to the Roman authorities. The people who heard this word immediately begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. They assumed God was trying to help Paul avoid imprisonment: "When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem" (Acts 21:12).

What happened next reveals Paul's apostolic paradigm of the mission of God.

Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done." (Acts 21:13–14)

It is easy to imagine the scene as those who loved Paul heard the prophetic word and begin weeping for the safety of their dear friend. They knew what he had already suffered for the gospel, and the thought of him being imprisoned pained their heart. Rather than being moved by their compassion, Paul's heart was broken by their response. They were weeping for Paul's safety, but something deeper was burning in Paul's heart. God had already spoken to Paul about what lay ahead of him.

"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." (Acts 20:22–23)

Paul's burning desire was to complete his mission. He did not know how it would happen, but the Holy Spirit had warned him that prison and suffering awaited him. Paul interpreted the word of the Lord as a warning to enable him to prepare his heart, but Paul's friends interpreted the prophetic warning as a sign that he should not go to Jerusalem. It grieved Paul's heart that his friends would consider his personal comfort above his apostolic mission. His only desire was to be faithful to his calling, not to avoid suffering.

For Paul there was something more precious than his own personal safety. The desire of Jesus had consumed him, and the mission of God was preeminent in his thinking. In Ephesus, he had let his companions keep him from addressing a crowd that would have imprisoned or executed him. This time, in Caesarea, he refused to allow his friends to stop him, even when he knew that going to Jerusalem would result in suffering.

The seasoned apostle illustrates perfectly the apostolic perspective on suffering. Suffering is real and normal in Christianity, but following the call and leadership of Jesus in His mission is our goal. We must first hear the Lord, and second obey, as different situations will require different responses. We certainly do not seek suffering or martyrdom, but neither should we fear it. And we do not make suffering the deciding factor in what we do or do not do. Jesus is worthy of our suffering when it is required for His mission.

Early in His ministry, the Lord told Paul to leave Jerusalem to go to the Gentiles because, if he stayed, he would likely lose his life or face imprisonment.

“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’” (Acts 22:17–18)

But later, when Paul was nearing the end of his life, the Lord spoke to him about the suffering and rejection he would surely face in Jerusalem. In one case, avoiding suffering was the right thing to do; but in another case, facing persecution was right.

We must be mindful of God’s sovereignty and realize that many things are out of our control, especially with regard to suffering. There are questions we cannot answer. For example, why did James lose his life but Peter have his life restored to him when he was miraculously delivered from jail by an angel (Acts 12)? We are only to remain faithful to the call of God.

The Expectation of Power

A biblical paradigm of suffering must recognize that God releases power on the Church in the midst of suffering. First, He preserves His people by releasing supernatural power to endure suffering. Paul testifies to this in his apostolic ministry. Though suffering brought him to the end of his natural strength, he found that God gave power to endure and remain faithful. Just as the power of God raised up Jesus after His death, so Paul found supernatural power when it seemed like he was dead.

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. (2 Corinthians 1:8–10)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (2 Corinthians 4:7–10)

Second, when the early church was under tremendous pressure, God released His power on them for the advancement of the gospel. When the apostles began to face persecution, they asked for power to preach the gospel and for supernatural signs to give a witness to the gospel. God answered with a visible manifestation of His presence to encourage His people that He would be with them in suffering.

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:29–31)

Again, when Stephen was preaching the gospel to the men who killed him, it was apparent that God was with him. Scripture records, “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15).

One night, in a Philippian jail, God sent an earthquake to turn a moment of suffering into a moment of salvation.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened. . . . Then he [the jailer] brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:25–30)

In Luke’s account of the life of the early church we see the power of God and the persecution of His people joined together in the bold preaching of

the Word. God released power to advance the gospel, and persecution rose up against the disciples. According to the book of Acts, both are normal for the Church.

The Church's Response in Persecution

Prayer and Persecution

Prayer and persecution are joined together in the book of Acts from the very beginning. When the apostles begin to face persecution in Jerusalem, they immediately convened a prayer meeting. This reveals the importance of prayer in their thinking and in the life of the early church (Acts 2:42; 6:4). Prayer was their first response to the pressures of persecution.

When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'—for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:23–31)

The content of their prayer shows the role that prayer played in the early church. They were not surprised by the opposition that was coming against them. They prayed in confidence, as one body, and asked for the power of God to continue in ministry. This story demonstrates that the early church was accustomed to finding power in the place of prayer together. This corporate prayer meeting breathed life into the fledgling church and enabled it to continue to advance in the midst of a hostile environment.

When Peter was released from prison by an angel, he went to the house of a well-known believer and found many gathered in a prayer meeting.

When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. (Acts 12:12)

A quick survey of the book of Acts shows that corporate prayer was inherent to the strength of the community. Luke repeatedly highlights individual and corporate prayer (Acts 4:31; 6:4–6; 8:15; 9:11, 40; 10:2; 11:5; 13:1–3; 16:25; 20:36; 21:5; 22:17; 28:8). When the church came under pressure, they found their life and strength in the place of corporate prayer, seeking God together for answers and receiving strength as a people.

Even when Paul and Silas were in prison in Philippi, the most natural thing for them to do, albeit in the middle of the night, was to minister to God from the place of worship and prayer. This was the natural rhythm of their lives and response of their hearts, and even the pressure of prison did not keep them from it. Paul and Silas sustained themselves with prayer and singing.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. (Acts 16:25)

The book of Revelation, perhaps more than any other book, shows the significance of the prayers of the saints. The book dignifies prayer, showing us that the prayers of God's people ascend directly before His throne. Though the answer may be delayed, or even seem not to come, our prayers matter to God. They are so significant that God's divine activity in Revelation is directly connected to the prayers of His people. He takes the prayers of the Church and combines them with His activity to release His work on the earth.

And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. (Revelation 5:8)

And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, ashes of lightning, and an earth-quake. (Revelation 8:3–5)

The Church is portrayed in Revelation as praying, persecuted, and victorious. Most believers recognize the need to pray for those who are persecuted. We see this, for example, in Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica, a city where Paul and the church he had planted suffered persecution. Paul prayed for them constantly.

We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 1:2–3)

The author of Hebrews reminds those who are living in relative freedom not to forget those who suffer for the sake of the gospel. We are called to remember, particularly in prayer, those who are persecuted.

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. (Hebrews 13:3)

Prayer is the life source of the Church, especially during times of persecution. In the New Testament we see the persecuted ones praying much. Prayer both by and on behalf of the persecuted gives strength to God's people.

Proclamation

The book of Acts also joins persecution and proclamation together. In fact, the thrust of many of the prayers in the New Testament is for continued strength to proclaim the gospel in the midst of opposition.

Peter and John's response to being told to stop preaching was to challenge the statement and continue to proclaim the gospel.

So they [Jewish leaders and elders] called them [Peter and John] and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:18–20)

The apostles subsequently gathered to pray, recognizing the conflict over their message of the supremacy of Jesus, and asked for continued power to declare the gospel with boldness.

"And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:24–30)

When the apostles were imprisoned for speaking about Jesus, an angel released them from prison and gave them a very specific command—keep preaching!

They arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life." And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. (Acts 5:18–21)

Even when beaten for preaching the gospel, they rejoiced in identification with Jesus and immediately returned to teaching and preaching. It was their second significant warning in Acts to be silent about the message and name of Jesus. On each occasion they chose to obey the Lord and continue speaking out.

And when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (Acts 5:40–42)

Paul reminded the persecuted believers in Thessalonica that though he had faced persecution in Philippi, he had come to Thessalonica with boldness to preach the gospel, even in the midst of resistance.

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. (1 Thessalonians 2:1–2)

The Lord had a plan for Paul's life, that he would give a witness before kings, and we read that his preaching before kings and government officials took place in the context of persecution. Arrest and imprisonment created the opportunity for Paul to preach the gospel to men who would otherwise have never heard. When Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, he used his Roman citizenship to appeal to Caesar. Because the Roman officials did not see any reason to keep Paul in jail, it is likely that Paul made the appeal so that he could witness to Caesar.

Not only does persecution in the New Testament not stop the spread of the gospel, in some cases it actually creates a platform for the gospel to be shared. The apostles did not hesitate to use persecution to share the gospel whenever possible, and they were not intimidated by threats to remain silent.

The message of the New Testament is that suffering is no reason to halt the spread of the gospel. Opposition may cause tactics and strategy to shift,

and persecution may bring temporary setbacks, but the Word must continue to go forth. Even in the context of persecution the heartbeat of the Church should be for the proclamation of the gospel and the growth of the Church.

Persecution may mean we can no longer preach openly in the same way, so what matters most is that we do not allow persecution to alter the value system of the Church, especially as this is the ultimate goal of persecution. When we lose our vision for taking the good news to the lost, persecution has achieved its purpose.

At the same time, persecution can create a context in which we labor under great difficulty for seemingly small victories, but we should not become discouraged. What matters is faithfulness. We are called to be faithful in spreading the seed of the gospel and watering it. God alone can bring the increase.

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. (1 Corinthians 3:6–9)

Persecution may result in serious setbacks. For example, in the twentieth century, the Chinese church suffered intense persecution, so intense that some wondered if the national church would survive. However, decades later the Chinese church emerged stronger than before persecution began.

Trouble may come, but the people of God must retain a vision to make the gospel known. The early church grew strong precisely because the apostles understood this. We must set our heart to follow the apostles' teaching and example.

Persecution and the Global Church

Persecution covers a wide range of experiences from discrimination to martyrdom, and it is increasing, especially where radical Islam dominates. As believers in the Greater Middle East experience heightened levels of persecution, the global Church must heed the words of the New Testament and stand together as one body. Those who have a measure of freedom should use it to stand with those who do not.

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:26)

Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. (Hebrews 13:3)

God will preserve His Church, but He has called the Body to serve the Body. Paul expressed his deep appreciation for those who eagerly sought him out when he was in chains for the gospel.

May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains, but when he arrived in Rome he searched for me earnestly and found me. (2 Timothy 1:16–17)

The fact that Paul mentions Onesiphorus as one who was not ashamed of his chains tells us that some were ashamed of Paul's chains and did not stand by him. It forces us to the question today: are we ashamed of our brothers in chains? If not, and if we are part of the Body, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12, why do we not hurt when they hurt? And if we do hurt, why do we not act?

In light of the crisis facing Christians in the Middle East and else- where, we must ask ourselves some serious questions:

- How do we reach out and minister to the displaced?
- How do we strengthen the Church in hostile areas, so that a vibrant Christian witness remains?
- How do we support and send workers into difficult areas?
- How do we serve those who are traumatized by persecution, particularly the most vulnerable, like women and children?

As the Church begins to focus resources on the most unreached places on earth, it becomes clear that the unreached are unreached simply because it is difficult to reach them. We are called to wisdom and faithfulness over recklessness and martyrdom, but we also face the challenge of not surrendering difficult regions of the world to darkness. George Otis, Jr., offers some particularly penetrating thoughts on the matter:

Should the Church in politically or socially trying circumstances remain covert to avoid potential eradication by forces hostile to Christianity? Or would more open confrontation with prevailing spiritual ignorance and deprivation—even if it produced Christian martyrs—be more likely to lead to evangelistic breakthroughs?

Islamic fundamentalists claim that their spiritual revolution is fueled by the blood of martyrs. Is it conceivable that Christianity's failure to thrive in the Muslim world is due to the notable absence of Christian martyrs? And can the Muslim community take seriously the claims of a Church in hiding? . . .

In these modern times our fears over what might happen have resulted in an increasing incidence of missionary de-tours and evangelistic paralysis. The primary question being asked by would-be missionaries and mobilizers today is not, "Is the field ripe?" but, with increasing frequency, "Is it safe?" If relative freedom and safety cannot be affirmed satisfactorily, the only prudent option is to step back and wait for God to "open doors."

But what is meant by the term open doors? By popular definition, the concept clearly involves more than mere assurance of personal safety. Opportunity and feasibility are cast as equally important components, demanding in the first case some kind of legitimating invitation or welcome to minister, and in the second a realistic resources-to-challenge ratio. With either of these factors absent, the assumption is made that the doors to effective ministry are, for the time being, at least, "closed."

Despite the prevalence of such notions, a careful reexamination of the New Testament places them in clear conflict with the view and practices of the early church. The idea, for instance, that God's servants must be welcomed in their ambassadorial roles is nowhere encountered. The record shows that from Jerusalem and Damascus to Ephesus and Rome, the apostles were beaten, stoned, conspired against, and imprisoned for their witness. Invitations were rare, and never the basis for their missions.

It is a salient fact of spiritual engagement that God almost never calls His people to a fair fight. The recurring theme of Scripture is one of giants and multitudes. Time and again Christian warriors were asked to face foes whose natural resources exceeded their own.

The script is the same for us today. As we face the emerging powers of darkness manifest in the challenges of urbanization, massive refugee populations, militant Islam, and growing numbers of totalitarian governments opposed to the spread of the gospel, there are no fair fights. And, no, the field is not safe—but neither is walking in unbelief . . . Spiritual inroads into enemy territory are nearly always the result of godly initiatives rather than heathen invitations. God’s strategy in reclaiming His fallen creation is decidedly aggressive: Rather than wait for the captive souls to petition for liberation, He dispatches His servants instead on extensive search-and-rescue missions.³

While wisdom must be used, precautions should be taken, and martyrdom is not the goal, Otis raises some serious questions that we must wrestle with, questions that many of our brothers and sisters are already asking.

Understanding what the Bible says about suffering and persecution does not make the experience any easier. Suffering can create lasting trauma and often requires deep pastoral ministry. Families are torn apart; children in particular can suffer long-term side effects. We must not overlook the pain of suffering simply because it is common to Scripture.

The overall message of Scripture is not that persecution is a light and easy thing or easily overcome, but that it tests the work of God on earth. His people face the assault of wickedness out of faithfulness to God. Their willingness to suffer for Jesus’ name demonstrates the worthiness of Jesus, the maturity of His people, and the depth of their love. People do not suffer willingly for things that they do not love deeply. Therefore, suffering in the Church demonstrates love for Jesus. We suffer because we love Him and consider Him worth what Paul calls “light and momentary affliction.”

In suffering, the Church is called to bear witness before men and before spiritual powers. It is why persecution is both physical and spiritual. It is part of an epic drama in which darkness resists the work of God by opposing His people on earth.

³ George Otis, Jr., *The Last of the Giants*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1991), 261–264.

... so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. (Ephesians 3:10–13)

Paul recognized that his suffering was a statement of God's wisdom to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places. It was significant and advanced the work of God. The suffering of the Church is a proclamation to the rulers and authorities of darkness that there is something worse than suffering (hell) and something, Someone, who is worth suffering for—Jesus.

This present age is the only chance the Church has to demonstrate the worth of Jesus in the context of suffering. A glorious day is soon coming when there will be no more tears and no more suffering. Until that day, millions worldwide are demonstrating their love and allegiance to Jesus in the fires of persecution. For those who are not suffering persecution, this is our one moment to stand with those who are bound in chains and suffer for the name of Jesus, to befriend and uphold those of whom the world is not worthy.