

Acts 16:16-40

Outward Church: Understanding Christian Persecution

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Christianity is like a nail; the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes.¹ In 1966, Mao cast out Western missionaries and persecuted Christians. *A Star in the East* reports, “Ironically, the persecution of Protestants may have been the single most beneficial event for the success of the Christianity in China!”

1. It transformed the Chinese Christian movement into a local movement led by the Chinese.
2. It got rid of the liberal missionaries who didn't believe in Christ.
3. Those who endured genuinely believed in Christ.

Christianity is like a nail; the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes. Do you think that's true of the church in America? If our country persecuted us, would we go deeper into Christ and become more faithful Christians? Would we protest? Or would we rejoice? Would we see trial as an opportunity or a hardship?

Paul and Silas, and the early Christians face persecution in Philippi. Paul was going outside the city to the place of prayer, and a possessed girl follows him. She is known for telling fortunes and making her masters money. The slave girl cries out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” (v17)

Paul loses his temper. He grows so annoyed he calls her demon out, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” Of course, it comes out of her, and she loses her abilities, and it ruins her owner's business. They seize Paul and Silas and throw them into jail, but not before a mob beats them with rods. Can you imagine an angry, sweaty mob surrounding you and beating you with rods?

My brother and I drove to our town's marina one night, and there was a prom going on at the big lodge by the lake. Some of the high-schoolers were outside around a car. They came over to us and asked us if we had poured mustard on their vehicle. We hadn't. We didn't even know who they were. We went and got in our car, and as we were driving out, they started running after our car, like they were going to stop us or something. We sped away, and I did not speak words of edification as we left. It was pretty scary.

What Paul and Silas experienced was more like the riot we saw on the news on January 6. That's like what they experienced. The magistrates beat them, threw them in prison, and shackled their feet. But they weren't the ones rioting. They were the victims of the riot. They loved Jesus, and Paul had a short temper. Do you think it was partially Paul's fault they were thrown in prison? I kind of do. So, is what Paul experienced really persecution or his own fault? Yes! I want to show you a chart I made asking this question (show slide):

Is it really Christian persecution (or just my fault)?

How can we tell if what we experience is real persecution or just my fault? First, there has to be some experience of suffering. I don't mean sickness or the relational struggles we usually face. I mean suffering caused by someone else. **If suffering is a result of...**

1) Faithfully following Jesus & sharing him

¹ The original quote is, “Religion is like a nail, the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes.” *A Star in the East*, 43, Kindle.

This is persecution. Jesus taught his disciples that any who faithfully follow him will also face suffering.

John 15:18, 20b, 21 (ESV)

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. . . . If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. . . . But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.”

If they persecuted Jesus, they'll persecute his followers. If you are truly following Jesus, you should expect to face persecution in some form. This is dependent on them persecuting you “on account of my name.” It has to be for the name of Jesus, as opposed to some other reason, for it to be actual persecution. This brings us back to Paul because there's another reason people suffer.

2) Behaving badly

Paul got beat up (outside of God providentially allowing it) because he lost his temper. That doesn't excuse what they did, but he also had a role in it. Maybe the town would have eventually risen up and stoned him, but we don't know. Verse 18 says when this girl kept calling Paul and them out, he became “greatly annoyed.” This is the same word used back in Acts 4:2 to describe how the priests and captain of the temple and the Sadducees felt “greatly annoyed” at Peter and John for preaching Jesus rose from the grave. Generally, you don't want to share character qualities with those guys, but here Paul loses it.

Now Paul is both, isn't he? He is faithfully following Jesus and sharing him, and yet he's also behaving badly, so I put a little center zone called “maybe” for Paul and those of us who mess up even as we share Christ. I don't think it's always persecution when others reject us or treat us badly. It depends on the situation. For Paul, I think it was clearly a yes. He was persecuted for Christ and his actions. But perhaps God wanted Paul to lose his temper, leading to this girl's freedom. I think what he did was good, but he seemed to do it out of aggravation: good results, but lacking manner.

But there is this other zone where Christians are simply behaving badly. The suffering that results isn't from persecution. It's the consequences of making bad choices. Sometimes Christians do stupid things, and when people react, they act like they're the ones being persecuted.

Two examples:

I read an article this week entitled “[What is Christian Persecution?](#)” that gave two different examples. It's from Ligonier Ministries, which is who our youth group is using right now. Tom Ascol writes:

The first was with a young professional who was full of love for Jesus and zeal to see the gospel spread. Steve became burdened about an unconverted coworker and saw it as his Christian duty to witness to this man in an effort to persuade him to become a believer. His zeal caused him to spend hours of his time at work talking to his friend about salvation and explaining the gospel to him.

When his boss warned him to stop “pushing his religion while on the clock” Steve took it as an affront to the lordship of Christ and refused. After he was fired, he told me his story in terms of suffering for his faith. Steve saw himself as having been persecuted by his boss.

What do you think? Was that persecution for Christ? Or did he lose his job because he wasn't using his time to do his work? I believe there can be Spirit-inspired moments to share the gospel, even as you work, which is different than not doing your job. Why didn't he invite his friend over for dinner or go out to drinks after work? There were other ways to witness without stealing time from his employer. God calls us to do a great job at our work as a way of bearing testimony to him (1 Cor 10:31). The same writer shares his experience meeting one of China's most famous Christians, Samuel Lamb. Samuel Lamb . . .

... spent twenty years in a Communist prison [enduring extreme privation] because he refused to quit preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. I met Samuel Lamb while visiting the church that gathered in his home in Guangzhou, China. After two hours of worship in cramped conditions, our group of ten American pastors was invited to talk with Pastor Lamb at length.

I will never forget his response to one of our questions about persecution and the advance of the gospel. "In America," he said, "the church has experienced prosperity and is growing weaker. In China, the church has experienced persecution and growing stronger. Persecution is much better than prosperity."

The first time Lamb went into prison, he had 30 members in his church, then he had 100 when he came out. The third time he came out of prison, he preached to 4,000 to 5,000 every week. Christianity is like a nail; the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes. The Bible tells us:

Christians will face tribulations, even persecution.

Writing to Timothy, Paul says:

2 Timothy 3:12 (ESV)

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,

I think this means that genuine Christians who are sharing Christ and living for him should expect to face pushback or trial in their life. Attacks can come from outside the church but from within the church as well. I think for Christians today, this means we should be careful of how much time we spend trying to avoid persecution. If Jesus tells us it's going to happen, why try to avoid it? Conversely, if persecution never comes, it doesn't mean you're not a Christian. But it might mean you need to get out of your comfort zone and take more risks for God. If we go back to the end of Paul's first missionary journey, we remember:

Acts 15:22 (ESV)

[Paul and Barnabas returned] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

We're all going to go through tribulations, a time we really wrestle with doubt, a loved one getting sick, the loss of a dear friend. We may even go through persecution where we are mistreated, harmed, or judged unfairly for our faith in Christ.

However, neither should we go around with a victim complex. We don't want to go around looking for persecution where there isn't persecution. We need to be careful to distinguish between:

Persecution vs. Loss of Privilege

Genuine Christian persecution can take the form of various degrees of persecution: social, financial, or even physical harm (Matt 5:11-12). Social harm could be being mocked, or lied about or to, or made fun of, or bullied because of your faith in Christ. Financial harm could be loss of job or property or legal threats because of your faith in Christ. Physical harm could be kidnapping, slavery, imprisonment, beatings, torture, and even death. There are low to moderate to very severe forms of persecution.

Loss of privilege, on the other hand, is when Christianity was prioritized in our culture and in the public square and is no more because we have become a more pluralistic culture. For example, I don't think a loss of prayer in the public schools or displays of the ten commandments in public buildings is persecution. That's a loss of privilege. Now we are like other religions that don't display their religion in public settings, and I'm fine with that. How about the war on Christmas? I'm fine with people saying Happy Holidays to me (happy Holy-days, right?). I just don't think the Lord wants us to get upset about these things.

Likewise, I don't think the church is being discriminated against over Covid. All sorts of businesses and movie theaters and restaurants are being limited in what they can do. Now is not the time to fight to not have to wear masks or to not follow capacity limits. I'm so grateful our church is working hard to comply with all state regulations. We try to go above and beyond what is required. I think that's what it means to love your neighbor well.

Open Door USA is a Christian organization that supports persecuted Christians around the world. Every year they publish "The World Watch List" of "The top 50 countries where its most difficult to follow Jesus." North Korea is #1. They report there are about 400,000 Christians there, and if you are discovered to be a Christian, if you're not immediately executed, you and your family will be sent to a concentration camp where you'll most likely die.

That's the hardest place, but how about the 50th most persecuted place, the Union of Comoros (pronounced "kaa-mr-owz"), an island in the Indian Ocean? If you share your faith, you'll face legal consequences. Some Christians face violence. Most have to keep their faith private. There are only 4,200 believers there. America isn't on the list.

I actually received an email from a French missions organization today that outlines a law that might be passed in France that will make life very difficult for French churches. The law would make it so churches have to apply to be churches and could lose that status without any hearing or due process. They would have to get regularly audited, and if they're not, the pastor can be fined 10,000 euros. And the government can oversee what the place of worship teaches, including closing it if it feels it incites hatred or violence. France is a secular state. It can be very difficult to be a church there. Let's remember to pray for France. This is not happening to us in America, but even if it was, how would we respond? With protest? Or joy?

Genuine persecution is an opportunity for joy and to see the Holy Spirit move in incredible ways.

Paul and Silas are chained in prison, singing and praying. Prison is no joke. It was a holding cell until the government figured out what to do with you. They didn't feed you. You had to know people who would take care of you. Otherwise, you'd waste away. But they're not worried because they have joy. And maybe they see it as an opportunity for God to move.

At about midnight, there's an earthquake, and the door goes flying open, and their shackles fall off. Here it is, Paul and Silas. Here's your chance to escape persecution! Go for it! Run! But they don't. Why not? Because they know God is going to work through their persecution, and they're happy! They're joyful. Their happiness isn't dependent on their rights but on what God is doing. They must sense the Holy Spirit is doing something significant. Then the guard comes running out, and when he sees the prison door open, he pulls his sword to kill himself. Paul saves his life. He yells they are all inside. When the jailer sees him, he rushes in trembling and asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Acts 16:31 (ESV)

And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

When the jailer and his family hear the gospel, they repent and believe, and are baptized. **Question:** What if God wants to put the shackles on Christians so he can take it off non-Christians? What if he wants us to experience captivity so he can set the captives free? Doesn't it strike you that this is what Jesus did?

The Son of God was free! Not like you and I are free! He was God from all eternity past, exploring the universe, creating the world, living, moving, boundless. And he allowed himself to be bound, in human flesh (Philippians 2:4-11). The Son of God allowed himself to be held captive by the world in bones and skin and in the form of a little baby boy and a teenager and a dirty man. But that wasn't enough. He allowed himself

to be held captive by a cross. Jesus was persecuted so we could be set free when we repent and believe in him. And friends, if you don't know Jesus, you're still bound. You're bound in your sin and shame, and you need a Savior. Repent, believe, and be set free. Jesus rose again, casting off the grave, casting off the bonds of death, and one day, if you trust him, you'll rise too. He came to transform your life now and forever.

So count it all joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds (James 1:2). That's when the Holy Spirit moves. I think it's really interesting that at the end of this story, Paul speaks up and says, "Hey, I'm a Roman citizen. I have legal protections. You can't beat me without a fair trial." It's like, "Paul, why didn't you say something yesterday?!" The Holy Spirit must have directed him not to say anything, not to exert his rights. Christianity is like a nail; the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes. Paul was willing to be a nail because he had God's greater purposes in mind. He wanted to see God's kingdom come, no matter the cost.

Is that what we want? Then let's pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are persecuted. Let's pray for those believers suffering in North Korea and the Union of Comoros. And if we are tempted to claim we're being persecuted, let's just be careful with our words. Maybe we are, but we also don't want to cheapen what our brothers and sisters in those top 50 countries are experiencing. Genuine persecution is an opportunity for joy and to see the Holy Spirit move in incredible ways. Christianity is like a nail; the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes. Let's pray.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on Apple Podcasts. Read the story of our church here.

Discussion Questions

1. What is Christian persecution?
2. How might our behavior impact our suffering?
3. Do you think the church in America is persecuted? How so?
4. What is the difference between persecution and loss of privilege?
5. How does seeing persecution as an opportunity for joy reframe it?
6. How could the Holy Spirit use persecution for God's will?
7. Was Jesus persecuted? If so, what did it accomplish?

Sources

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