

## A Persecuted People

Today is the fourth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. There will be many commemorative services, both Christian and non-Christian. We will remember what happened four years ago. We will do this today. We will do this again next year at the five-year anniversary. We will do it again for the ten-year and the twenty-year anniversaries. And this is all good. We should remember. The motto was "We will never forget" and that is good. But there is a danger lurking here. The danger is that we live in the past, remembering what has happened and focusing on how we responded in both heroics and failure. I thought it would be in the spirit of those who died to remember other innocents who are being attacked and suffering today. While those who died four years ago were attacked because of the ideals of a group of people, today these innocents are being attacked for similar, though not identical reasons: their ideals are dramatically different than those who persecute them. These people who are being attacked today are the Christians living in one of the many nations that follow another religion. The institution under attack is the Christian Church.

To understand why the Church is being persecuted, it is important to recognize who built the church and why it was built. (Who created the church?)

Matt 16-18 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Jesus built the church based on the truth that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. If this is true, then all other religions are teaching false doctrines and Christianity and the Church are truly from God. As the great Jewish teacher, Gamaliel, once said, "if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." (Acts 5:38-39)

Why did God create the Church?

Eph 3:10-11 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We see that God built His church as a way to show the many, assorted, various aspects of His wisdom, not necessarily to the world, but to those in the heavenly realms. These rulers and authorities are those who would fight against God. God is showing them that they cannot fight Him, His wisdom is too great for them. He has outsmarted them by bringing salvation to the ones He loves even though it seemed that there was no way for us to ever be reconciled to Him because of our leaning towards sin. He brought that salvation to us through Christ Jesus our Lord. The Church is His vehicle to show that.

However, man will always go against God. So what God has created, man will try to destroy.

Acts 8:1-3 – And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup>Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. <sup>3</sup>But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

In those days, the persecution of the Church was being done by Saul specifically, the Jewish nation in general. However it wasn't long before the Roman Empire, the world power of those days, took over and really began the persecution. Thousands of Christians would give their lives for their faith over the next 300 years.

This shouldn't have come as a surprise. Jesus told us we would be persecuted.

Matt 24:9 "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me.

Jesus tells us that we will be persecuted. He says that if they did that to him, we would suffer as well (John 15:18-21). The Christians of the Early Church would know to expect to be persecuted. Today, if we were really listening to what the Gospels are telling us, we would realize that we too will be persecuted. The reality is not that we are not being persecuted; it's that we don't realize we're being persecuted.

In the US, we are persecuted based upon the morality we live by based on the Bible. When we stand up against homosexual behavior, adultery and pre-marital sex (which was called fornication in Jesus' time), abortion and other issues of our culture, we are put down and called names such as barbarian, closed-minded, bigot, intolerant. It's a type of persecution, though it is not life-endangering. However, here in the US, we actually don't realize how much persecution is happening around the world.

Attached at the end are some of the headlines regarding Christian persecution around the world for the past week.

Illustrations of persecution today.

"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" - Tertullian

The question we need to ask ourselves is:

*If persecution occurred to our church today, what would happen to your faith?*

Would we be able to stand up to those who would try to put us down? Would we keep our faith even if it meant our lives?

*How should the church react during these times?*

The church gets its power from the Holy Spirit.

Waited on the Holy Spirit before preaching (2:4)

In periods of non-persecution, the church should live in fear of the Lord:

Acts 9:31 - Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

The church prays for those who are being persecuted:

Acts 12:5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

The church keeps itself in check with the Bible:

Acts 20:28-31 Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

The church continues to meet even in hard times:

Heb 10:25 . Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Though the images of 9/11 are still with us, it is important for us to remember that other innocents are going through the same kind of attacks today. People around the world are being killed, imprisoned, tortured and having their homes taken away because of their faith in Jesus. We here in the US are undergoing a type of persecution by way of social pressures and political positioning. As a Church, we need to stand firm. We need to continue to teach the truth. We need to continue to let people know that God came down to save us from our sins and give us eternal life. When Jesus left this place for a time, he said that we needed to build the kingdom for him. We need to let people know who he is and what he has done. We will be persecuted in different ways for this, but we have our church manual – we need to pray for each other, continue to meet together, stay in the word and the truth, live in fear of the Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And we should always pray that God guide us and give us strength and peace for the day is coming that we will be tested ourselves and we need to be able to properly answer the question: *If persecution occurred to our church today, what would happen to your faith?*