

Doctrine of Persecution

1. Beginning with the apostles, the movement of the church in history has been described as "an advance through storm."

2. No sooner had the Christian enterprise been launched at Pentecost than the apostolic leaders (Peter and John) were summoned before the Sanhedrin.

Acts 4:1 And as they taught the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, challenged them,

Acts 4:2 They were disturbed that they taught the people, and preached of Jesus being resurrected from the dead.

Acts 4:3 These leaders of Israel apprehended them placing them in the Sanhedrin's holding area until the next day: for it was now evening.

3. Soon the opposition had produced the first Christian martyr, Stephen.

Acts 6:11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

Acts 6:12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

Acts 6:13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law ...

Acts 7:57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,

Acts 7:58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

Acts 7:59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.

3.1 Before his conversion, Paul persecuted Christians to the death. Acts 9:1-2 and Acts 22:3-4

Acts 9:1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest

Acts 9:2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Acts 22:3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today.

Acts 22:4 I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,

3.2 The early church, particularly in Judah, was persecuted but [none the less] the body of Christ grew by leaps and bounds.

Acts 11:19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

Acts 11:20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

Acts 11:21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 12:1 Now about that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church.

Acts 12:2 And he killed James the brother of John with the sword.

Acts 12:3 And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. (Then were the days of unleavened bread.)

Acts 12:4 And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison ...

3.3 Throughout the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul and his team were pursued from city to city; persecution was continuously a problem.

4. Other books of the New Testament reveal this same pattern (the church always in the fire of persecution but never being consumed).

5. Therefore in his first letter to the Thessalonians Paul reminded them, "And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction."

1Th 1:6 And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit.

5.1 Paul sent Timothy to the Thessalonians "that no one be moved by these afflictions. You yourselves know that this is to be our lot." 1Th 3:2-5

1Th 3:2 And sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellow labourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith:

1Th 3:3 That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.

1Th 3:4 For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation; even as it came to pass, and ye know.

1Th 3:5 For this cause, when I could no longer forbear, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and our labour be in vain.

5.2 Peter encouraged his readers to "rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold ... may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

1Pe 1:6 Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

1Pe 1:7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

6. The last book of the New Testament is an apocalyptic of suffering saints waiting to be avenged and delivered.

7. Typical are the souls described by John in Rev 6:9-10: "under the altar were the many who had been slain for the word of God ... they cried out with a loud voice. 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood?'"

7.1 The Lord answered: "not until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren shall be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been."

8. Christ assured His followers that the disciple is not greater than His Lord. "If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you."

Joh 15:20 Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also.

9. In the world disciples are to expect tribulation; in fact we should be concerned when the world speaks well of us.

10. The disciples were told to rejoice when men spoke ill of them (Mat 5:11-12). Men would do more than speak against His Name, they would kill the disciples, thinking themselves to have done God service thereby (Joh 16:2).

Mat 5:11 Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

Mat 5:12 Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Joh 16:2 They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.

11. Christ sent His followers out as lambs among wolves to be the victims of rapacity.

Luk 10:3 Go your ways: behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves.

12. The result of Christian persecution is often designed to remove hypocritical and nominal believers or to reveal and confirm the genuine ones--such action being designed to spread the church and glorify God.

13. It is no coincidence that the New Testament word for witness, **martus**, becomes our English word for martyr.

13.1 A witness is a martyr. He stands ready to die for following the orders of the Captain of his salvation. He does not count his life "of any value."

Acts 20:24 But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

13.2 A mature believer will love Christ more than his own soul. He will rejoice and be glad (Luk 6:22-23), and counts it all joy even when persecuted (Jam 1:2).

Luk 6:22 Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

Luk 6:23 "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

Jam 1:12 Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.

14. The wrath of man does not of itself work the righteousness of God but God does make even this wrath praise Him. Jam 1:20 and Psa 76:10

Jam 1:20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

Psa 76:10 Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.

15. The blood of martyrs became the seed from which the universal church grew or as Tertullian put it, "The storm of persecution advanced the church."

16. An evil world relentlessly and perpetually attacks a defenseless little flock. What is the result?

16.1 The result is that the world destroys itself and increases the church! The wolf attacks the lamb, but the lamb lives and the wolf dies!

16.2 Who but God could make the very wrath of men praise and glorify Him?

17. Persecution was needed in the early post-apostolic church. Christ's promise of tribulation for the disciples in this world was abundantly fulfilled and joyously met.

17.1 The first physical persecution of the church by Rome occurred under Nero (A.D. 64-68) in the capitol city. It was reported in detail by Tacitus.

17.2 An even more determined and general persecution arose in various parts of the empire during the reigns of Trajan (98-117) and Hadrian (117-138).

17.3 Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote many of his letters while being taken to Rome for probable martyrdom in 115, and Polycarp, who was burned at the stake during a local persecution in Smyrna in 155, was said to have sung a song of praise even as the flames licked at his feet.

17.4 In 248 Rome was celebrating the thousandth anniversary of its founding. Their brilliant past made their national demise most alarming.

17.5 The barbarians were threatening. The rulers of Rome concluded the gods were angry for they were not being worshiped as they once were.

17.6 They concluded it must be the Christians at the heart of the problem: they had refused to accept the pantheon and now the pantheon was mad.

17.7 The rulers concluded they could only do one thing--wipe out the Christian "atheists" and return to the true worship of gods.

17.8 An edict was issued in 249 requiring all Christians to offer sacrifice. Those who did not suffered loss of property, imprisonment, torture, exile and even death.

18. Many bishops, presbyters and deacons were put to death. It was written of Christianity: "Their blood flowed in Roman streams."

19. In 295 Christian soldiers were ordered to sacrifice to the Roman gods or die. Persecutions multiplied in the army.

20. Many Roman military commanders were Christians and many died rather than sacrifice to the idols of Rome.

21. By 303 even Diocletian's Christian wife and daughter were required to sacrifice to the pantheon.

22. Christian buildings were ordered destroyed. Bishops and presbyters were imprisoned.

23. Scriptures were burned. Christians lost all legal rights and there was wholesale torture.

23.1 Persecution lasted until 311; in Palestine and Egypt the suffering was especially severe.

24. In this great tribulation many Christians were martyred, but others denied their faith.

24.1 Persecution however only revealed the futility of trying to eradicate Christianity. The empire would fall, but not the church.

24.2 These early "killing fields" produced two different reactions in the church--recantation and martyrdom.

25. There were those who folded, but many accepted graciously their martyrdom.

25.1 Agnes, a noblewoman of Sicily, died for her faith. Carpus, a Thracian bishop, would say to his executioners, "I saw the glory of the Lord, and I was glad, and at the same time I was freed from you and am not a party to your misdeeds."

25.2 Carpus was nailed to a stake and a Cyprian bishop of North Africa was beheaded in 258.

25.3 A whole body of Asiatic Christians presented themselves to their proconsul, Arrius Antonius, for martyrdom, to show him what a bath of blood he must wade through to destroy Christ's church.

26. Amidst persecution the Christian church grew.

26.1 Imprisoned and tortured confessors of the 3rd century might have uttered Martin Niemoller's words: "I believe my incarceration [under Hitler] is an instance of God's holy humor. They laugh scornfully, 'At last we have got him,' and arrest eight hundred more. But what is the result? Churches were full of praying congregations; 'it would be utter ingratitude to become bitter in the face of such facts.'"

27. Christians are suffering today in many parts of the world. Let me read from the April 16th issue of Newsweek: "... What many U.S. Christians fail to realize is that when Asians convert to Christ it requires enormous courage. Converts typically are ostracized by family and neighbors - and often they are targeted for persecution. Over the last six months, Chinese communists have demolished some 1,500 houses of worship - most of them Christian - whose members refused to accept direction from the state. In officially secular India, scores of Christians have been murdered and their churches trashed since the rise of militant Hindu groups.

“On Christmas Eve, churches in nine Indonesian cities were bombed, killing at least 18 believers and wounding about 100 more. An additional 90 Christians were murdered for refusing to convert to Islam, and some 600 more are still being forcibly detained.”

28. Though we shrink back in horror as we think of the Tribulation, we in this great land of ours need to be aware - the spirit of the Antichrist is indeed in the world today.

29. From our review of the *Doctrine of Persecution* and the judgments portrayed in the book of Revelation, it should be evident that the dreams of the optimist, for a world becoming increasingly better does not fit the pattern of God's prophetic Word.

30. The ultimate triumph of God is assured; and as the book of Revelation makes plain, Christ will reign over the earth and bring in a kingdom of peace and righteousness after the time of trouble has run its course.

Dan 7:21 As I watched, this horn was waging war against the saints and defeating them, Dan 7:22 until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom.

31. First, however, there must be the awful time of the Great Tribulation. As we have seen from several quotations from academics and theologians, there is much in the modern world which seems to portend just such a period.

32. The introduction of modern means of warfare with new capacity to destroy life and property, the shrinking of the world by rapid transportation and the invention of modern weapons of war make all the earth vulnerable to such scenes of devastation and destruction of human life.

33. The darkness of the human hour is in sharp contrast to the bright hope of the imminent return of Christ for His church as an event preceding the Tribulation.

1Th 4:16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:

1Th 4:17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Rev 3:10 Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.

34. In our study you no doubt noted the many promises of trials and tribulations for believers of every age. But we should all keep in mind God will not provide a load too heavy for us to carry. His promised delivery is based on our frame; it will never be overloaded.

35. This promise is certainly true for those living in the Tribulation. Standing, even in greater contrast with that darkness of Jacob's trouble will be the victory of Christ and His coming to save the day for Israel. The deliverance is perhaps best described in Zec 12:1-10 and Rev 19:11-15

Zec 12:1 This is the word of the LORD concerning Israel. The LORD, who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth, and who forms the spirit of man within him, declares:

Zec 12:2 "I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling. Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem.

Zec 12:3 On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves.

Zec 12:4 On that day I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness," declares the LORD. "I will keep a watchful eye over the house of Judah, but I will blind all the horses of the nations.

Zec 12:5 Then the leaders of Judah will say in their hearts, 'The people of Jerusalem are strong, because the LORD Almighty is their God.'

Zec 12:6 "On that day I will make the leaders of Judah like a fire pot in a woodpile, like a flaming torch among sheaves. They will consume right and left all the surrounding peoples, but Jerusalem will remain intact in her place.

Zec 12:7 "The LORD will save the dwellings of Judah first, so that the honor of the house of David and of Jerusalem's inhabitants may not be greater than that of Judah.

Zec 12:8 On that day the LORD will shield those who live in Jerusalem, so that the feeblest among them will be like David, and the house of David will be like God, like the Angel of the LORD going before them.

Zec 12:9 on that day I will set out to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem.

Zec 12:10 "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

Rev 19:11 I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war.

Rev 19:12 His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

Rev 19:13 He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.

Rev 19:14 The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.

Rev 19:15 Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.

