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ARE WE PREPARED FOR SERIOUS PERSECUTION?

We know that the early Church of God suffered severe persecution. Being persecuted always makes life more difficult. Persecution is very stressful. And we would prefer to do our best to avoid being persecuted by anyone. Yet God's people have repeatedly had to deal with severe persecution.

Let's look at something Jesus Christ said in the sermon on the mount.

Blessed *are* they who are **persecuted for righteousness' sake**: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. **Blessed are you, when *men* shall revile you, and persecute you**, and shall say all manner of evil against you **falsely**, for My sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great *is* your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:10-12)

"So persecuted they the prophets" means "**in this manner** they persecuted the prophets". Many of God's prophets were killed for preaching the words of God. So a comparison to the prophets of old means that we are talking about serious, life-threatening persecution.

Christ tells us that when we are persecuted and reviled "for righteousness' sake", then we will be blessed by God. But why are the people who seek to live by the laws of God persecuted? **Why?**

Are converted Christians going to be bad, unpleasant neighbors? Are they going to be lazy, unreliable employees? Are they going to be liars and thieves? No, converted Christians are not going to be any of these things. Converted Christians are going to be helpful and kind neighbors, and honest, diligent employees.

So why the persecution?

THE ROOT CAUSE FOR PERSECUTION

It always goes back to Romans 8:7. The persecution is "for righteousness' sake". It is **the keeping of all of God's laws** and commandments and ways that **evokes hostility** and resentment in the natural human mind. The natural mind resents God's weekly Sabbath; it resents the dietary restrictions; it resents the annual Feasts and Holy Days; and it resents the laws of tithing.

The natural human mind also resents that true Christians don't observe the customs that society around us observes. It resents that true Christians don't go along with the world's vain customs for clothing and

grooming, and that true Christians strive to be modest in their appearance.

In short, the carnal mind resents that we don't accept the way of life that all of society around us has accepted. As the Apostle Peter put it:

Wherein they think it strange that you run not with *them* to the same excess of riot, **speaking evil of you** : (1 Peter 4:4)

In many cases it is actually a lot stronger than just "thinking it strange". When we don't do the things people around us do, when we refuse to go along with their customs (not keeping Christmas, Easter, etc.), then many people actually get quite angry. And then "speaking evil of us" is just the tip of the iceberg.

So the root cause for persecution for keeping God's commandments (i.e. "for righteousness' sake") is the natural human mind's spontaneous enmity against God.

When we understand this root cause for persecution correctly, it means that **there is nothing we can do to avoid that persecution**. We obviously cannot choose to stop living by the laws of God. That is not an option. And obviously, we should never try to appease those who are angry because we keep God's laws.

As long as we insist on living by all of God's laws, there is nothing we can do that would cause the carnal human mind to somehow "like us more". Understand the following point: It is not what we say and do that creates resentment towards us. **It is what we stand for** that creates resentment in the carnal mind. It is what we represent that creates resentment.

Now this resentment by the carnal mind can even be seen when the carnal mind has to deal with people who are not remotely converted, but who observe **some** of God's laws. It is not uncommon for the carnal mind to resent such people as well.

where we don't allow any insults to cause us to take offense.

Christ set us the example. People insulted Him, reviled Him, persecuted Him and then killed Him. And instead of taking all those things personally, as you and I spontaneously do, Jesus Christ prayed "**forgive them** because they don't know what they are doing". Christ didn't hold any personal grudges against those people.

And that is all that Christ is requiring from us. If we can honestly pray "forgive them for what they are doing to me", it means that **we are not holding a grudge**. And that is the primary reason for this instruction from Jesus Christ.

To make this quite plain:

Jesus Christ instructs us to pray for those who persecute us to make sure that we don't hold any grudges towards anyone.

It is important for our spiritual well-being, and for our relationship with God that we don't hold any grudges against anyone. And the way we demonstrate to God that we don't hold any grudges is **by genuinely praying for such people**. The greatest help in getting our attitude right in this matter is to always keep in mind that **we are the servants who owe God "ten thousand talents"**, for us an impossible-to-pay debt.

Praying for people who seek to harm us reflects on our self-image. And it suffices for us to genuinely pray "forgive them because they don't really know what they are doing".

Therefore **I take pleasure** in infirmities, in **reproaches**, in necessities, in **persecutions**, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10)

Paul accepted these things with a positive frame of mind. He understood that his character was being tested. Such adversities reveal our character to God.

The Greek verb translated as "I take pleasure" literally means "**I think well**", or "I think (it) good". It doesn't really have anything to do with "pleasure". So here the expression "I take pleasure" is a bit misleading.

Paul wasn't talking about "pleasure". Paul was really saying "**I willingly accept ...**" the various trials. The NRSV captures the meaning of the Greek verb a bit better. That translation reads:

Therefore **I am content with** weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:10 NRSV)

"I take pleasure" almost implies actively choosing these things. "I am content with", on the other hand, implies accepting whatever comes our way, a more passive response to these trials. "I am content with" says: I didn't choose it, but I willingly accept it. And that is basically what Paul says in this verse.

Let's look at the next Scripture. Talking about the seed on stony places in His parable of the sower, Jesus Christ said:

Yet has he not root in himself, but endures for a while: for **when tribulation or persecution arises** because of the word, by and by **he is offended**. (Matthew 13:21)

Facing persecution tests our foundation in God's Church. "He doesn't have root in himself" means

that **he hasn't really established any solid roots** in the Christian way of life. He's been in God's Church for some time, but he has never made the effort to develop deep unshakeable convictions. The Greek verb translated "he is offended" (i.e. "skandalizetai") also includes the meanings "to cause to stumble, to entice to sin".

In other words, the seed on stony ground doesn't necessarily "become offended"; but he feels pressured by persecution, something he had not anticipated. He is enticed to sin. Then he leaves God's Church.

As an aside, we might just note **the distinction** between the seed **on stony ground**, and the seed **among thorns**. Both individuals had become a part of God's Church. The seed on stony ground has a much shallower foundation and leaves the Church because of being **pressured by some tests and some persecution**, and he may or may not become "offended". But he leaves.

The seed amongst thorns has a somewhat better foundation. He is not pressured by the same persecution as the seed on stony ground. That is not what trips him up. Rather, the seed amongst thorns has come to the point where **he wants to acquire more money**; and with that motivation he then becomes "unfruitful", i.e. he no longer produces any real fruits, as he had done earlier in his time in God's Church.

A lesson for us is that persecution may cause us to take offense, or it may cause us to just give up on living the Christian life. So why does God expose us to persecution?

God allows us to face persecution in order to test the level of our conversion and the level of our commitment to God's way of life.

Let's look at another Scripture.

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. (John 15:20)

Here Jesus Christ spelled out one reason for persecution quite clearly. God's people are persecuted because they are recognized as standing for the things Jesus Christ taught. As I said earlier, persecution is not for anything we have done; it is for who we represent.

The question then is: will persecution cause us to give up on being true Christians? Paul asked the question:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *shall* tribulation, or distress, or **persecution**, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (Romans 8:35)

Here Paul lists a number of different types of serious trials. Persecution is just one of those categories. Paul's answer to the question in verse 35 is: **nothing can separate us from the love of God**. In other words, every possible type of trial can be overcome with the help of God's spirit. However, we all have our own free, independent minds. And we ourselves must decide to persevere through every trial that comes upon us, always looking to God to help us through His spirit. Every trial, including being persecuted, is a test for being given eternal life in the Family of God.

Sometimes the way to deal with a trial is to flee.

But **when they persecute you** in this city, **flee** you into another: for verily I say unto you, you shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come. (Matthew 10:23)

Fleeing is not a possibility in all situations of persecution. But in some situations that is the best way to evade persecution. One key in situations of persecution is to focus on striving to fulfill the calling God has given to us, to faithfully live the way of life that Jesus Christ explained during His ministry.

God will reward our faithful obedience to His laws and His whole way of life. When Peter asked Jesus Christ what the rewards would be, Jesus Christ, in reference to those who had made sacrifices to obey God, answered:

But **he shall receive an hundredfold** now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, **with persecutions**; and in the world to come eternal life. (Mark 10:30)

Again Jesus Christ showed that persecution is a part of the Christian life. Even when we are blessed, there will be tests and trials of persecution. God is testing our spirit. And faith is our evidence that God will always help us through whatever persecution we may face. That is what Paul tells us.

We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; **Persecuted, but not forsaken**; cast down, but not destroyed; (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

Paul made his point with four different scenarios:

- 1) Troubled (Greek "hard pressed") but not distressed.
- 2) Perplexed (Greek "in dire straits, without resources") but not in despair.
- 3) Persecuted (Greek "pursued, put to flight") but not forsaken.
- 4) Cast down (Greek "thrown to the ground") but not destroyed.

Each one of these trials is severe, but in due time God always intervenes for us and saves us. And during these trials we must have faith that God will help us. They are all tests of our faith in God. How we

cope with those trials is very precious to God.

That **the trial of your faith**, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, **though it be tried with fire**, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: (1 Peter 1:7)

When the trial is brought on by other people, then that is very commonly a form of persecution. It is when we are faithful through the trials that confront us, that then our faith is tried "with fire". Peter then tells us that such trials should not surprise us.

Beloved, think it not strange concerning **the fiery trial which is to try you**, as though some strange thing happened unto you: (1 Peter 4:12)

Between now and the time of Jesus Christ's return, whenever that may be, God's people will face some serious trials, to test our faith. Oh yes, we all want to be taken to the place of safety by God, wherever that may be, but that event will involve probably **the greatest tests of our faith**, greater than any tests we may have faced up to that point in time. And I have no idea what those tests of faith will be like, no idea at all.

But if we give up then, or at any time before then, then all the trials we have thus far endured will have been in vain. That is something we need to guard against, going back on our commitment to God. The Apostle Paul mentioned this point to the Galatians.

Have you suffered so many things in vain? if *it be* yet in vain. (Galatians 3:4)

The Galatians had suffered serious persecutions within their own community. They faced great pressure from neighbors and former friends to go back into the world and its ways. And Paul acknowledged those trials. And Paul's letter to them is his attempt to encourage them to hold fast, and to stay faithful to their calling. Something Paul explained to the Philippians, he could equally well have said to the Galatians.

For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but **also to suffer for His sake**; (Philippians 1:29)

Paul himself experienced a great deal of persecution. But Paul himself had started out by "persecuting Jesus Christ".

And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, **why do you persecute Me?** And he said, Who are You, Lord? And the Lord said, **I am Jesus whom you persecute** ... (Acts 9:4-5)

And so once Paul repented and was converted, it was Paul's turn to be persecuted.

For I will show him **how great things he must suffer** for My name's sake. (Acts 9:16)

While I cannot prove this, I strongly suspect that Paul had to endure more trials than any other man or woman in New Testament times. I am thinking of **the sheer volume of trials** that came upon Paul (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-27). That is what Jesus Christ was revealing in Acts 9:16. And Paul stayed faithful throughout all those trials.

That should be an enormous encouragement for us. If Paul could stay faithful throughout all those trials, with the help of God, then you and I are also capable of staying faithful through whatever trials may come upon us, also with the help of God.

Let's look at another Scripture.

So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith **in all your persecutions and tribulations** that you endure: *Which is* a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of **the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer**: (2 Thessalonians 1:4-5)

The people in the Church in Thessalonika were also persecuted by the people in their own community. They were persecuted because they had rejected the pagan religion, of which they had previously been a part. Once again we see that the suffering brought on by persecution is a part of the training to be later resurrected into the Kingdom of God.

The same point is mentioned again in the message to the Smyrna era of God's Church.

I know your works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but you are rich) and *I know* the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews (i.e. pretend to be Christians), and are not, but *are* the synagogue (i.e. church) of Satan. Fear none of those things which you shall suffer: behold, **the devil shall cast some of you into prison**, that you may be tried; and you shall have tribulation ten days: **be you faithful unto death**, and I will give you a crown of life. (Revelation 2:9-10)

For those people the persecution amounted to being falsely accused of crimes and then thrown into prison. And while their persecutors were mortal human beings, in these verses Jesus Christ points out that **the real instigator** for this persecution was **Satan**.

This is important for us to understand, because when we ourselves face persecution "for righteousness' sake", then we should likewise recognize that Satan is the driving force behind the human beings who do the actual persecuting. Satan uses human beings to persecute us, just as he did for the people in God's Church in Smyrna.