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# Discipleship and Suffering: The Christian Response to Persecution

## Introduction

Persecution of followers of Jesus Christ is happening around the world today. Sometimes it is hidden, but it is increasingly open, and the response of the international community is muted at best, and blithe indifference at worst. Reports from Open Doors USA, Voice of the Martyrs, the US State Department Annual Religious Liberty Report, and empirical evidence from around the world indicates that those who bear the name of Christ are suffering under increasing levels of hostility and overt persecution.

Thus, to talk about a “Coming Storm” is in itself a Western-centric perspective when considering the existing storms raging around the world against Christians. And it is a humbling privilege as Western Christians to be associated with, and to be able to learn lessons from, the Persecuted Church of the 21st Century. However, as this article is written for Western Christians, the majority of whom do not experience overt persecution yet, this will be written from their perspective and for their benefit.

## Why Is There Religious Persecution Today?

Open Doors USA (2016d) argues that when viewed from a human perspective, there are at least three possible answers.

1. Authoritarian governments seek to control all religious thought and expression (e.g., North Korea). Open Doors USA affirm that religious groups are often viewed as enemies of the state because religion generally calls for a loyalty to a higher entity than to the state itself.

2. Hostility towards non-traditional or minority religious groups (e.g., Mauritania). For example, Mauritania’s population is >98% Muslim, and hostility towards minority groups, particularly towards Christians, comes from these social actors more than from the government. It may be argued

that governments tolerate this social hostility, either to further to their own religious or political objectives, or to divert social hostility away from themselves to convenient scapegoats.

3. A refusal to recognize basic human rights, including Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief.” Open Doors USA affirms that in 1966, the United Nations developed the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 of the ICCPR focuses on four elements of religious freedom:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.

3. Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. (Office of the High Commissioner 1966)

Tragically, in many countries there is almost complete disregard for these UN declarations and agreements. Despite humanity’s best intentions, the 21st Century is already showing the most sustained levels of persecution of religious minorities in general and Christians in particular of the past 20 centuries. One possible reason why the various facets of international law are often ignored by different social elements in Islamic nations is the fact that from an Islamic perspective, the laws of humanity must cede to the laws of Allah. The laws of Allah will always trump, and if necessary, negate, any human laws not in harmony with Allah’s will.

## The Current Reality of Persecution of Christians

As the 21st Century has progressed, the worldwide Body of Christ has continued to experience persecution in multiple countries around the world. If there were more martyrs for Christ in the 20th Century than in

the centuries from the apostolic church onwards combined, the 21st Century shows no sign of this trend of increasing violence towards Christians diminishing.

Freedom of conscience in general, and those who bear the name of Christ in particular, are under attack in dozens of countries and local communities worldwide. Christians are experiencing severe persecution around the world.

According to Open Doors USA, each month 332 Christians are murdered for their faith, 214 churches and overtly Christian properties are destroyed, and there are 772 forms of extreme violence committed against Christians—rapes, abductions, and forced marriages, etc. (2016b). Open Doors USA goes on to state,

Christian persecution is any hostility experienced from the world as a result of one's identification as a Christian. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions, Christians in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith. Beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment, and even death are just a few examples of the persecution they experience on a daily basis.

According to The Pew Research Center, over 75% of the world's population lives in areas with severe religious restrictions (and many of these people are Christians). Also, according to the United States Department of State, Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbors simply because of their belief in Jesus Christ. (2016c)

According to Open Doors USA (2016a), the worst 50 countries for Christian persecution in 2016 are as follows.

1. North Korea	11. Yemen	21. Qatar	31. Tajikistan	41. Kuwait
2. Iraq	12. Nigeria	22. Egypt	32. Tunisia	42. Kazakhstan
3. Eritrea	13. Maldives	23. Myanmar	33. China	43. Indonesia
4. Afghanistan	14. Saudi Arabia	24. Palestinian Territories	34. Azerbaijan	44. Mali
5. Syria	15. Uzbekistan	25. Brunei	35. Bangladesh	45. Turkey
6. Pakistan	16. Kenya	26. Central African Republic	36. Tanzania	46. Colombia
7. Somalia	17. India	27. Jordan	37. Algeria	47. UAE
8. Sudan	18. Ethiopia	28. Djibouti	38. Bhutan	48. Bahrain
9. Iran	19. Turkmenistan	29. Laos	39. Comoros	49. Niger
10. Libya	20. Vietnam	30. Malaysia	40. Mexico	50. Oman

Persecution is not an abstract concept. It means young Christian girls being raped at will by Muslims in Iraq, or abducted and forced into Islamic marriages in Egypt; whole communities being burned alive in Nigeria by Boko Haram; exclusion from public jobs and social discrimination in SE Asia; being beheaded along the beaches of Libya by ISIS; almost no access to any Christian literature, Bibles, or witness for those living under Sharia law in Mauritania; willful self-censorship by many in the USA who would otherwise suggest that a straight reading of the Qu'ran and Hadeeth indicates that Islam is not a religion of peace for fear of violent repercussions against fellow Adventists in Pakistan or Bangladesh by those who insist that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. (Does anybody notice the profound irony here?)

And it also means prosecution of service providers in the UK and the USA, and the imposition of crippling fines or informal economic sanctions from pro-LGBTQ corporations, for any who refuse to participate in the totalitarian LGBTQ agenda.

Thus, when talking about persecution, we are talking about real people like you and I, with families whom they love dearly, who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, and who are paying today, as you read this article, for that decision in profoundly terrible ways. We are talking about the reality that as you read this document, our sisters in Christ are being raped purely for bearing the name of Christ, our brothers are being beheaded for the same reason, and it is only a matter of time before Christians living in the West will be experiencing such persecution.

Just before the 2nd Coming of Jesus Christ in the sixth seal of Revelation, Jesus reveals in the fifth seal that his true church will be a persecuted, martyred, and militant body. "When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?' They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed" (Rev 6:9-11 NRSV). Thus, while there will be persecution of the saints, God has established a limit beyond which evil and persecution cannot pass.

## Who Is Our Enemy?

Adventists are blessed with incredible insights into the struggle between God and Satan. Our enemy is a real, literal, personal being, a fallen angel from the glories of heaven, who has engaged in relentless war against Jesus Christ and subsequently against his disciples.

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According to Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:18), Satan is described in the Scriptures as the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Eph 2:2), prince of this world (John 14:30), god of this world (2 Cor 4:4), prince of demons (Matt 12:24), the hinderer (1 Thess 2:18), the accuser (Rev 12:9-11), liar and father of lies (John 8:44), angel of light (2 Cor 11:14-15), the tempter (1 Thess 3:5), a roaring lion (1 Pet 5:8-9), and a murderer (John 8:44).

Despite these fearsome titles, Satan is a defeated enemy. He goes around with great wrath, for he himself knows that his time is short (Rev 12:12). Jesus saw Satan fall as lighting from heaven to earth when the disciples ministered in divine strength (Luke 10:17-20). Jesus has promised us the same victory today (John 16:33). The Apostle Paul experienced this victory in Christ and wrote about it to the church at Rome (Rom 8:28), and the Apostle John promised Satan's final defeat (1 John 3:8, Rev 20:10).

Yes, Satan is powerful and cruel and utterly evil, with no redeeming trait of any kind. Yet, we are not to be afraid. "Thanks be to God! He has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:57).

## How Does Satan Attack the Persecuted Church?

### Overt Attacks

Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:56) see in the New Testament that Satan used five external pressure sources to bring about overt attacks on the Early Church. These early strategies for overt attack are also manifest today. The five external pressure sources identified by Cunningham and Estabrooks are as follows:

*Civic rulers.* Pontius Pilate, Herod Agrippa (who murdered the Apostle James in Jerusalem, Acts 12:2), and Nero were the most obvious examples of civil rulers who persecuted the Apostolic Church. Modern-day equivalents would be Ceausescu of Romania, Mao Tse Tung of China, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia, Fidel Castro of Cuba, the Iranian ayatollahs, Kim Jong Un of North Korea, and the Politburo of the USSR.

*Religious leaders.* It was the Jewish priestly class who were most directly involved in demanding and pushing for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and Peter made it very clear to the Jewish audience at Pentecost about their portion of responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion (Acts 2:36). Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' most dogged opponents were the Jewish religious leaders, (the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, scribes and lawyers), a theme which is particularly emphasized in the Gospel of John. Even with the resurrection of Jesus, and the eye-witness testimony of the Roman guards, the Jewish religious leaders paid bribes from the temple treasury to cover up the resurrection. The Acts of the Apostles records the Jewish religious

leaders' persecution of the apostles, and the Apostle Paul began his career as a Jewish religious cleric seeking to destroy the Apostolic Church. Not all religious leaders were persecutors, for example, many of the priests were baptized after Pentecost, but the faithful stand of these individuals does not deny the greater reality, which was the implacable hatred of the Jewish priestly class towards Jesus and his disciples. Modern-day equivalents would be mullahs across the Muslim world who preach hate towards Christians and stir up mobs to attack Christians, their homes, and businesses.

*Business leaders.* These tend to oppose Christianity when it is perceived as a threat to their income levels or business models. Cunningham and Estabrooks identify the most obvious examples of business people persecuting the apostles as being the story of the possessed slave-girl whom Paul delivered (Acts 16) and the silversmiths of Ephesus (Acts 19). Acts reveals that the owners of the slave-girl were not concerned about spiritual truth per se, but primarily about the impact on their business of Paul delivering the slave-girl. "But when the owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities" (Acts 16:19). Modern-day equivalents would be the pro-LGBT businesses such as Pay-Pal, Apple, and the NBA.

*Mobs.* Cunningham and Estabrooks argue that when a powerful group in society cannot close down the Christian witness through legal methods, they may turn to "the street" to attack Christians and thus hide behind the anonymity that mobs provide. Crowds of the underemployed or religiously zealous can be swayed to violence through intemperate rhetoric, and the lure of spiritual gain, sexual violence or booty can act as a powerful force (in the crusades, potential crusaders were offered plenary forgiveness of sins plus the chance for rape, pillage, and booty). Modern-day equivalents would be the mobs who attack Christians in Pakistan and Indonesia, and the social media attacks in the USA on those who hold to biblical parameters for marriage and gender.

*Families.* Cunningham and Estabrooks delineate the simple facts of Scripture. Jesus experienced rejection from his own brothers and community of Nazareth (Matt 13:57, John 1:11). Rejection by a family member goes back to Abel's murder by Cain (Gen 4). Jeremiah's own family tried to murder him (Jer 12:6), and Jesus explicitly taught that accepting him may cause someone to lose their family (Matt 10:35, 36). Moving to today, it is incontrovertible to any involved in cross-cultural mission that many converts to Jesus Christ today face explicit and violent threats from their family and extended families, mostly in communities with a dominant religious group other than Christianity.

Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:60) go on to outline how Satan

attacks God's church through the following overt ways: isolating Christians (e.g., through arrest, expulsion or enforced dispersion; creating conflict among Christians; attacks from local dominant faith leaders and faith groups/mobs; religious nationalism, in which Satan inspires civic leaders to try and force Christians to return to their "ancestral" or "former" religions or the pagan gods of their ancestors, all in the name of patriotism or nationalism; secular humanism, which proclaims tolerance but is profoundly intolerant of Christians and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ; anti-conversion laws; strict controls over approved worship centers; anti-blasphemy laws, often enforced by mobs rather than by the local judiciary; economic discrimination; martyrdom; abductions and forced marriages for Christian girls; upholding God-less ideologies; and neutralizing the Christian witness through closing all churches, closing all Christian institutions, and ministries, cutting off links with Christians in other countries, forbidding travel by Christians, closing access to financial facilities for Christians, and "re-educating" and indoctrinating Christians and their children).

### Internal Attacks

Drawing on the experiences of the persecuted church, Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:29) argue that while Satan attacks the persecuted church in many overt ways (e.g., imprisonments, beheadings, physical assaults, etc.), he also attacks it via the following internal forms.

*Pride.* Pride was Satan's own precipitating sin in heaven (Ezek 28.11-17), and his appeal to pride in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3.5) is a source of constant temptation for Christians today.

*True guilt.* Satan constantly accuses people in their own hearts of their known sins and confessed mistakes. Satan is often very successful in discouraging the saints because he is reminding them of what is true—they are indeed saints with sinful pasts. Yet, according to Cunningham and Estabrooks, God has provided full forgiveness when there is confession of sins (2 Tim 1:9), with Ps 51 revealing the joy of forgiveness in David's penitential experience following his sin with Bathsheba. Furthermore, according to Rev 12:11, believers counter and overcome the accusations of Satan in three ways: (1) by the blood of the Lamb; (2) by the word of their testimony; and (3) by their sacrificial love one for another.

*False guilt.* This comes when Satan accuses disciples of imaginary failures when they are facing persecution and they seek understanding of their current predicament. "Why" is a common question? Satan may respond with false answers, suggesting their persecution or present-day difficulties are the direct result of their spiritual failures. This is the burden



of false guilt that drains spiritual energy and accomplishes nothing. Satan wants people to concentrate on the past (false guilt) or the future (a debilitating sense of foreboding). Indeed, “God wants us to concentrate on the present, claim forgiveness for the sins of the past, commit the future into His hands, and live for Him in the present” (33).

*Fear.* It is natural to be afraid of many things. Many have unspoken fears, for example, of heights or sharks or speaking in public. Many also experience an existential fear about death and the manner of their death. There is a fear to speak up in times of persecution for fear the persecution will fall upon them personally. There is the fear of the unknown, or of how to respond in times of crisis. People can combat fear by remembering the following biblical understandings:

God is in control. He will only allow us to experience what He knows is best for us. We must trust Him as we’re encouraged to do in Philippians 4:6-7 and Acts 27:23-25. We are only pilgrims and strangers on this earth. Our real home is heaven. . . . We must be ready. (See Hebrews 10:32-39). God always brings good from evil as we’re told in Romans 8:28 . . . the enemy can only harm our bodies, not eternal condition (Luke 12:4-5). (Cunningham and Estabrooks 2004:37)

*Materialism.* “Satan subtly promotes the attitude that says money, property, possessions, physical comforts, as well as worldly fame and honor are the most important things in life” (43). According to Cunningham and Estabrooks, the prosperity we have is freely given to us by God and is indeed a blessing until it starts to dethrone God in our lives. Materialism is the attitude that exalts the material aspects of life over all else. “Not to say, “There is no God” but to say, “We don’t have any need of God” (43). Cunningham and Estabrooks recount the story of the church leader from Romania who lamented on this topic, “In my experience, 95% of the believers who face the test of external persecution will pass it, while 95% of those who face the test of prosperity fail it” (43).

## The Process of Persecution

Dr. Johan Candelin, head of the Religious Liberties Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, studied how persecution begins and is manifest in countries around the world. He identified the following three-stage process leading to persecution becoming entrenched within a society (in Cunningham and Estabrooks 2004:72).

1. *Disinformation.* For Candelin, this may be initially passive and then active against Christians, often across the local media. Through various media outlets, “Christians are robbed of their good reputation and their



ability and right to answer accusations made against them" (72). This deliberate disinformation leads to discrimination.

2. *Discrimination*. This may be first passive, and then active. The hostile public opinion that results from disinformation leads naturally to discrimination. In Candelin's analysis, Christians are relegated to 2nd class citizenship with inferior socio-economic and political status when compared with the majority groups in society.

3. *Persecution*. This may be first passive, and then active, and is the logical next step once the prior two stages are in place. "Once the first two steps have taken place, persecution can be practiced without normal protective measures being taken" (72). Persecution can arise from multiple actors, as described above, either with or without explicit consent and approval from the country's rulers. In many parts of the world, "the accusations of the attackers turn the victims into the villains" (72). A classic example from history are the stages that led from the *Kristellnacht* to the Final Solution.

## Towards a Theology of Christian Persecution

Jesus defined persecution using four verbs in Luke 6:22, "Blessed are you when people *hate* you, and when they *exclude* you, *revile* you, and *de-fame* [*reject*] you on account of the Son of Man" (NRSV, emphasis added).

Cunningham and Estabrooks argue that it is clear that Christians are not persecuted randomly, but because all persecution of Christians is ultimately targeted at Jesus Christ himself (73). "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 keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me" (John 15:20-21 NRSV). Persecution happens naturally for disciples of Jesus Christ, because this world has first rejected Jesus Christ.

Jim Cunningham (2004:73) developed the "HEIR" persecution index to define persecution based on Luke 6:22. He outlines the HEIR acronym in general as follows:

**H** = Hate (shut us down). Christians are hated because of what they believe, and are intimidated to cause them to lose hope.

**E** = Exclude (shut us up). Christians are excluded to silence their witness in society.

**I** = Insult (shut us out). Christian voices are systematically excluded from civil debate, and the motives of Christian ministries are impugned.

**R** = Reject (shut us off). Open persecution is the natural conclusion of the previous three stages.

It is important to recognize in this HEIR framework that persecution happens long before mobs attack Christian churches and pastors are slaughtered in the streets. Persecution starts whenever forces in society seek to shut down the Christian witness and voice in the public marketplace. This is happening in 2016 in countries like Canada and the USA, where “Social Justice Warriors” are seeking to enforce unbiblical social constructs on societies through the use of bullying corporations and a sneering media environment towards Christians.

Cunningham goes on to argue that the Apostle Paul also indicated that those who are HEIRs in suffering for Christ will become HEIRs in his glorious inheritance. “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Rom 8:16-17 NKJV). Thus, when Christians today experience *hatred, exclusion, insults, and rejection*, God promises they will become heirs with Jesus in his glory—a beautiful promise (73).

Jesus also spoke about persecution in the final beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my *account*” (Matt 5:10-11 NRSV, emphasis added).

A critical shift is now taking place in the Matthean Beatitudes. Up to this point, all the previous Matthean Beatitudes can be explained in OT terms, and each was perfectly expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ himself. We now come to the climax of the Beatitudes, and in these final Beatitudes personal loyalty to Jesus is openly introduced. As Jesus is the perfect exemplar of Beatitude-living, such personal loyalty to Him is the inevitable consequence of seeking to live out Beatitudes, particularly the final Beatitudes which deal with persecution.

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that it is the “wise” who build their lives on his teachings (Matt 7:24-27). While the early followers of Jesus were persecuted because of their preaching, the record of the early church indicates that in putting the teachings of Jesus into practice they also presented a profound challenge to the existing socio-economic order (Acts 2-10).

Yet, to his persecuted followers, Jesus promised that he will be with them “to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). And when brought to trial, he promised to speak for them, “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say: for what you are to say will be given to you at that time” (Matt 10:19). Furthermore, our response to the rejection of the world will determine our relationship with God. “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will

acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (Matt 10:32-33).

<sup>18</sup>If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.

<sup>19</sup>If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. . . . <sup>33</sup>In the world you face persecution. But take courage: I have conquered the world. . . .

<sup>3</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 15:18-19, 33; 1:5).

Thus character is not formed in times of crisis—it is revealed for what it already is. Every decision today helps to shape our character for tomorrow. We prepare for persecution tomorrow for the sake of Christ by seeking by God’s grace to fully live and exemplify the Beatitudes and the other teachings of Jesus Christ today.

## Anticipating Personal Persecution

In the West, the concept of tolerance now means that the only thing we may insist upon is that one must not insist on anything. Many believe it is wrong for a person to encourage someone who is on their own valid path to change to theirs. The postmodern world has no place for absolute truth, hence accusations in the West that the Bible is “hate literature” because it insists that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation (John 14).

The reality though is that it is Jesus Christ who is the focus of these attacks. Because this world and its various ideologies hate Jesus Christ and his unique role and claims, persecution is targeted at his followers. As Jesus said, “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). The question then is not only how do we respond to brothers and sisters living under persecution, but how may we best prepare ourselves for living under overt persecution?

This question of preparing for overt persecution is particularly important for Adventists in the West. Adventist eschatology reveals that in the end times, God’s faithful remnant will not be a triumphant, glorious, and well-received global movement, but will be a church militant, under severe economic sanction, enduring public and legal opprobrium, shorn of its institutions, tax-free exemptions, grants of land, access to banking, legal, visa, and financial instruments, and ultimately facing the death penalty for refusing to accept the Mark of the Beast.

Yet, the current *modus operandi* for the global Seventh-day Adventist Church relies on a benign banking, legal, tax, and political environment,

in which visas are issued on request, funds move globally without hindrance, tax benefits are actively sought and granted, and overt institutions grow and receive public applause.

Adventists in general, and Western Adventists in particular, must recognize and internalize the reality that the message entrusted to God's end-time remnant compels us to prepare for persecution by learning the deep spiritual lessons from the Persecuted Church of the 21st Century, and to understand that the freedoms currently enjoyed in the West are merely a temporary and transient stepping stone to overwhelming legal, social, and financial pressures seeking to either force Adventists to comply with wider social mores, or be closed down as a public institution and as a public voice.

Adventist administrators face huge internal pressures from their constituencies to keep local Adventist institutions going. Pressures to maintain ongoing employment for Adventists, to support the tithe base, to maintain cherished facilities, and to pour funds into unviable institutions are huge. Woe betide any conference president who recommends the closure of a cherished academy or school to the local constituency.

This focus on maintaining current infrastructure and institutions ensures that Adventist administrators in the West are ignoring their theoretically primary role as spiritual shepherds, which would suggest they focus not on preserving the past (which in the form of Adventist institutions will one day be destroyed anyway by a hostile public environment), but on equipping and guiding the church spiritually for the coming storm.

## Adventists and the Coming Final Persecution

How then can Western Adventists prepare for the coming storm? According to Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:7), one option would be to enter a bunker mentality, cower in fear, and lose any desire to be a blessing for the world around. Another option would be to buy properties in remote mountain areas and become "preppers." Some may lash out in aggression, seeking via the political processes to enforce a "Christian" morality in each nation. Others may smile complacently, and say that these things must be, that persecution will shake the chaff (i.e., others) out of the church while leaving the true grain (i.e., me), so bring it on. And still others will have a speech that is harsh, critical, condemning, and aggressive towards the lost all around, when many of the lost are seeking a winsome, wooing, and winning manifestation of God's love in their own community.

None of the above responses to persecution are legitimately derived from the Bible in general or the Sermon on the Mount in particular. A

more biblical approach, as argued by Cunningham and Estabrooks, would be to prepare for persecution in three ways, “Intellectually—I know it is coming. Practically—I have prepared my people for my imprisonment. Spiritually—I am ready for prison” (2004:7, 8).

The Holy Spirit reveals through the Apostle Paul the truth that those living through persecution are able to teach discipleship living in the free world incredible biblical truths about what true discipleship means. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Cor 1:3-4 NRSV). Thus, Adventists in the West need to ask in humility and with profound respect of those living under persecution for the lessons they have learned so all may be better prepared for the anticipated global storm.

### **How Do We Respond to Those Experiencing Persecution?**

First, slow down. “When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:12-13). When we sit with Iraqi Christian women who have lost their daughters to ISIS, and the silence of grief comes over the mothers as they grieve their lost daughters, like the friends of Job, we are called in like manner to sit in silence before such suffering. Slow down, be silent, affirm the victim’s right to grieve, and weep with those who weep. We cannot simply ignore the suffering of those who bear the name of Christ.

Second, speak up for those who cannot speak up. “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps 82:3, 4). God calls his people to be a voice for the voiceless in their suffering and injustice, for example, signing petitions, writing to our representatives in Congress, etc. “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute” (Prov 31:8). We are not called to a comfortable middle-class Christian experience, assuming that because we are okay then everyone else must be okay. We worship God according to our conscience (Religious Liberty [RL] and the greatest commandment), and he in turn calls us to “love our neighbor as ourselves” (the 2nd commandment). Thus we cannot preach RL but be silent on segregated congregations or marginalized communities, or be silent on hungry children in our midst, or be silent while abuse victims sit in suffering silence in our pews,

or be silent while single parents struggle to survive from day to day. Precisely because of our RL spiritual birthright, we are called to speak up about and minister to those caught in human trafficking, police brutality, economic inequality, unsustainable debt, family breakdown, environmental degradation, moral chaos, and systemic social injustice.

Fourth, identify with the Persecuted Church whenever possible. “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Heb 13:3). We are to offer practical support wherever possible, to educate ourselves about religious liberty, and to reach out whenever possible to those suffering for Christ.

In practice, there is much we can do: become engaged in Religious Liberty ministries; educate ourselves on Religious Liberty issues and trends; join the NARLA ([www.religiousliberty.info](http://www.religiousliberty.info)); sign up for the Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors USA newsletters; provide financial, emotional, and practical support for the families of prisoners of conscience; become active in the NAD’s refugee and immigrant ministry ([www.refugeeministries.com](http://www.refugeeministries.com)); read the reports of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (<http://www.uscirf.gov/>); and pray. . . pray . . . pray—pray for those being persecuted, for prisoners of conscience, and their families.

## How Do We Prepare for Persecution Ourselves?

The Seventh-day Adventist approach to eschatological persecution often tends to focus on the correct identification of the eschatological actors portrayed in Dan 10-12, Rev 12-18, etc., and on the trigger events and sequencing of key events such as the close of probation, Jacob’s time of trouble, and the little time of trouble, etc.

Open Doors, an evangelical group, focuses on spiritual preparation for when Christians personally experience persecution. Such spiritual preparation is laid out in the book they have published, *Standing Strong through the Storm* by Estabrooks and Cunningham, which represents a curriculum containing six key lessons relating to spiritual preparation for, and response to, persecution. These six lessons are as follows:

1. *Sometimes you need to build yourself a cell.* Be still, and know that I am God—Psalms 46:10 One Chinese church leader, who spent 23 years in prison, once said this to Christians who did not face persecution: “I was pushed into a cell, but you have to push yourself into one. You have no time to know God. You need to build yourself a cell, so you can do for yourself what persecution did for me—simplify your life and know God.” It is vital that we spend time with God, to grow in Him, so we are prepared to stand strong in the face of persecution.



2. *God keeps secrets.* “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” Isaiah 55:8-9. There have been countless stories of persecuted Christians who have died without seeing the fruits of their labor. However, God knows all that has been and all that is to come. Our labor is not in vain, it is in His hands.

3. *Weakness is a direct path to power.* “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” 2 Corinthians 12:10. An Egyptian Christian reflected on the way he was treated when he converted to Christ: “In great suffering you discover a different Jesus than you do in normal life. . . . Pain and suffering bring up to the surface all the weak points of your personality. In my weakest state, I had an incredible realization that Jesus loved me even right then.” True empowerment does not come from human means, but through Christ alone. It often takes being at our weakest point to realize this.

4. *Overcoming is greater than deliverance.* “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” Romans 12:21. Persecuted Christians, no matter what country they are from, do not ask us to pray that persecution would end, but rather ask us to pray that they stand strong through the persecution. They do not wish to be delivered from the persecution, but rather ask us to pray that they would be able to overcome the trials that they are facing in a way that is honoring to God.

5. *Extreme hurt requires extreme forgiveness.* “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments” Luke 23:34. A Christian widow from Iran said: “I only had hatred in my heart for my enemies who had murdered my husband. But one day a miracle happened. God taught me how I could love my enemies. . . . I had been praying for this, even though on the deepest level I didn’t want it to happen. Gradually, through a process of ups and downs, God answered this prayer.” The only way we can get through extreme hurt is by forgiving people as Christ did.

6. *Prayer is the ultimate fellowship.* “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” Hebrews 13:3. Many persecuted Christians often feel isolated and alone, since they are unable to fellowship with other believers. However, prayers from Christians half a world away have brought the same amount of encouragement that fellowship would have for these persecuted Christians. Prayer is vital—not only as a direct line to God, but as a way to encourage our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world.” (Open Doors USA 2016d)

## How Do We Respond When Facing Persecution Ourselves?

The teachings of Scripture are clear—we do not respond to persecution



with violence. The Apostle Peter, once a man of impulsive violence, was explicit in this regard. We do not return “evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Pet 3:9 NKJV). Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount also rejected violence on the part of his disciples “But I say to you who hear: ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you’” (Luke 6:27, 28 NKJV).

What then are some appropriate biblical responses to persecution? Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:285-295) outline the following fourteen biblical responses we may consider:

1. *Fleeing*—when it is clearly God’s revealed will. Cunningham and Estabrooks provide the following biblical examples, given for our instruction. Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt when instructed by an angel to do so (Matt 2:13, 14). Jesus also commanded his followers to flee from one town to the next if they were persecuted (Matt 10:23; Luke 9:5). The Apostle Paul fled on a number of occasions from one town to the next when facing persecution (Acts 9:25, 30). He did not make fleeing a constant practice, but fled when it was necessary to save his life and ministry.

2. *Staying and enduring*. Cunningham and Estabrooks argue this was modeled by Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:41-52).

3. *Hiding*. Cunningham and Estabrooks describe the two Israelite spies who were happy to hide on Rahab’s roof while spying in Jericho. Many modern-day Christians are forced to either hide or hide others during times of persecution.

4. *Boldly remaining as the salt and light of the world*. This teaching of Jesus in Matt 5:13-14 comes immediately after his beatitude on the blessings of those who experience persecution. Salt preserves, and light dispels darkness. When Christians flee, their preserving and enlightening impact departs with them.

5. *Affirming a non-violent response*. Disciples of Jesus Christ place their pain and desire for vengeance in the hands of God, who knows everything and will one day executive perfect justice (Ps 43:1; Rom 12:17-21; Prov 25:21-22).

6. *By giving one’s life*. According to Cunningham and Estabrooks, “Martyrdom is described as a legitimate response to persecution” (2004:287), with Jesus revealing that a special crown is reserved for those who lay down their lives for their faith (Rev 2:10).

7. *Exercising legal privileges*. The Apostle Paul was willing to use his rights as a Roman citizen to defend himself, and also to appeal to Caesar for a hearing (Acts 22, 25). When there are legal difficulties for Christians, Christians can document incidents and ask the worldwide church for

prayer and other support, for financial support for persecuted Christians, to serve as an advocate with government officials, and to help educate members about their legal rights within a given jurisdiction.

8. *Not being surprised.* The Apostle Peter explicitly counsels disciples to NOT be surprised when facing persecution. “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified” (1 Pet 4:12-14 NKJV emphasis mine).

9. *Rejoicing.* In 1 Pet 4:13, there is a command to rejoice in sufferings, and the Apostle Paul commanded disciples to rejoice in all things (Phil 4:4). James also commanded people to rejoice in their sufferings for Christ (Jas 1:2, 3), and we are to be comforted by the beautiful promise of God in Rom 8:25, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (NKJV).

10. *Pray with thankfulness* (Phil 4:6), including praying for fellow sufferers (Acts 12:5; Heb 13:3; Col 4:18) and our persecutors (Matt 5:44; Rom 12:14).

11. *Refuse to be ashamed.* “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (1 Pet 4:16 NKJV).

12. *Refuse to retaliate*—consider Jesus Christ in his passion.

13. *Trust God* that nothing can separate us from him (Rom 8:31-39) and that God will never allow persecution to become unbearable on a personal level (1 Cor 10:13).

14. *Stand firm* together with fellow brothers and sisters. When one part of the Body of Christ suffers, all the other members suffer (1 Cor 12:20-27).

## Conclusion

The Scriptures portray an eschatological remnant that is neither triumphant nor comfortable. Rather, it is the church militant that survives through to the 2nd Coming, facing overt persecution from external actors, and riven by internal stresses between the wheat and the tares. Nonetheless, Jesus Christ gives a series of beautiful promises to those who stand faithful to the end:

“To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Rev 2:7 NKJV).

“He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death” (Rev 2:11).

“To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it” (Rev 2:17).

“And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’—as I also have received from My Father; “and I will give him the morning star” (Rev 2:26-28).

“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (Rev 3:5).

“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name” (Rev 3:12 NKJV).

“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev 3:21). Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!

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