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## God's Tests

By David Servant

# PART FOUR

## Wrapping it Up

## EIGHTEEN

### A Closer Look at Persecution

How I would love to examine the lives of other Bible characters, whom we have not yet considered in previous chapters, as they journeyed to fulfill their own divine destinies. We could walk with people like Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Esther, Gideon, Jeremiah, and Daniel. All were born for a reason; all experienced difficulties and were tested; all watched the working of the sovereign hand of God; all matured. All of them, to some degree or another, could be compared to you and me. I encourage you to take the time to read about their lives in light of the principles we've learned so far. You'll be blessed.

In this final section, I want to finish unwrapping the package we've opened. We've considered a lot of biblical truth, but there is more to be said. In this chapter, we'll take a look at the subject of the persecution of Christians, looking for answers to some very perplexing questions.

Although the Bible assures us that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12), persecution of believers around the world varies from place to place and from time to time. Those of us who reside in nations with religious freedom often have little idea of what it is like to live where being a Christian is a ticket to losing one's family, job or life. According to the *World Evangelical Alliance*, over 200 million Christians in at least 60 countries are currently denied fundamental human rights solely because of their faith.

Some years ago I spoke with the late David Barrett, editor of the monumental book, the *World Christian Encyclopedia*. A master at compiling data, Dr. Barrett told me that he conservatively estimated the number of Christians who annually lost their lives for their faith to be around 150,000. In previous years, he estimated it was more than 300,000. These were ordinary Christians who were murdered for following Christ or for committing themselves to a righteous cause because of their faith in Christ. For those of us who live with little

persecution, this is difficult to fathom, and we can't help but ask, "Why does God allow wicked people to persecute and even kill Christians?"

Some would answer by saying that Satan is the god of this world and is running everything; therefore, God can't do anything about the persecution of His people although He would like to stop it. I think we've sufficiently proved that idea to be very unscriptural in light of the number of times God has supernaturally delivered His people from persecution.

There has to be a better explanation as to why God sometimes permits His people to be persecuted, and why He does or does not deliver them from that persecution. But let me first confess that I'm not claiming to have all the answers. I don't think that anyone does.

*One possible* explanation is that trials of persecution fall under the categories of either MITs (Maturing/Testing Intended Trials) or in some cases DITs (Disciplinary Intended Trials). Let's first look at trials of persecution that fall under the category of DITs.

### **Persecution as Discipline**

Here is an undeniable fact that some Christians would like to deny: God may allow persecution to come upon His people, *if* they have been disobedient, in order to bring them to repentance. Anyone who has ever read the Old Testament knows that. Time and time again, God permitted foreign nations to dominate Israel to bring them to repentance. There is also evidence in the New Testament of God disciplining His people by permitting persecution.

If you've ever studied the book of Hebrews, you know it was written to persecuted Jewish Christians who were being tempted in their sufferings to revert to Judaism. Did you ever notice, however, that the author indicated that their persecutions had been permitted because of God's discipline? We find that fact in Hebrews 12:3-11:

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives." *It is for discipline that you endure*; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which we all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but *He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness* (Heb. 12:3-11, emphasis added).

I think it should go without saying that God only disciplines those who are disobedient. Persecution is one way that God might do that. (You may also want to take a look at 2 Thes. 1:4-5, which *might* also be referring to an incidence of God permitting persecution as a means of discipline.)

## Who is Exempt?

Can any of us claim to have been perfectly obedient to God from the day of our initial repentance and new birth? (Certainly not me.) Thus every one of us are candidates for God's discipline.

The author of Hebrews wrote that *all* of us have suffered God's discipline, yet to many believers, God's discipline is unfortunately an unfamiliar concept. When God disciplines them, they rebuke Satan. What they need to do is rebuke themselves and repent! Take note the apostle James wrote that before anyone resists the devil, he needs to make sure that he is submitted to God: "*Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you*" (Jas. 4:7, emphasis added).

God may discipline us by permitting persecution, but that is not the only means He may use. We've already learned in an earlier chapter that God may permit Satan to bring various trials in hopes of motivating the disobedient to repent. One example of such a trial could be sickness. Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians and told them that very thing:

For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:30-32).

You probably know that the Corinthian church was full of strife. They were transgressing a very important commandment that Jesus gave to the church: "Love one another even as I have loved you" (John 13:34). So it should be no surprise that the Lord disciplined them by the means of sickness. Some had even died.

Paul wrote that we can avoid God's judgment if we judge ourselves (see 1 Cor. 11:31). That means if we will confess our sins and repent, we can avoid God's discipline.

Does this mean that every Christian who is sick has disobeyed God and is being disciplined by Him? Is sickness always a DIT? No, certainly not. Sickness can also fall under the category of a Self-Inflicted Trial (SIT) or a MIT. If you mistreat your body and become ill as a result, for example, that is a SIT.

Undoubtedly, some of the sicknesses that Christians suffer are a result of God's discipline. He removes His protective hand and allows Satan to afflict their bodies in hopes of bringing them to repentance.

If I find myself ill, I do a spiritual checkup to see if I've somehow opened the door to God's discipline in my life. I encourage you to do the same. No need to ask your pastor or Bible study leader or best friend—go to God yourself and find out directly from Him. He lives inside of you by the Holy Spirit.

Sadly, some Christians take this concept to an extreme. Finding themselves ill they say, "God must be trying to teach me something. This sickness must be His will. So I'll just suffer, and if it's His will to heal me, He'll heal me." That is wrong thinking. Yes, it could be true that God is trying to teach you something (if you are suffering a DIT)—such as trying to teach you not to commit a particular sin that you are persistently committing. But if you are suffering a DIT, it is not God's will that you remain sick any more that it is His will that you continue sinning. So repent of whatever you need to repent of, and then trust the Lord for your healing.

## **Persecution as a Means of Maturation or Testing**

God may also permit persecution as a MIT (Maturing/Testing Intended Trial).

Some claim that if Christians just have enough faith, they won't be persecuted. With all due respect to those who make such claims, that is simply not true. Jesus never promised us exemption from persecution. Rather, He guaranteed that we would be persecuted (see John 15:20). Paul declared, "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). He told the saints of Thessalonica that they were *destined* for persecution (see 1 Thes. 3:3).

Some have gone so far as to say that if we have enough faith, we are guaranteed that we will never be martyred. That is absurd as well. The church's very first martyr, Stephen, is described in the Bible as a man "*full of faith* and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5, emphasis added).

Moreover, the list of faith heroes found in Hebrews 11 mentions a number of people who were tortured and martyred (see Heb. 11:35-37). All the original apostles (excluding Judas, of course) were martyred, with the possible exception of John. It is estimated that, during the first three centuries of the church as many as six million Christians were martyred. There have been millions more since then, and the Bible predicts future martyrs during the Tribulation.

## **Other Reasons Why God May Permit Persecution**

God may permit persecution in order to further the spread of the gospel. Jesus Himself said:

But before all these things, they will lay their hands on you and will persecute you, delivering you to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors for My names' sake. *It will lead to an opportunity for your testimony* (Luke 21:12-13, emphasis added).

Paul wrote (while under arrest) to the Philippians:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in Christ has become known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear (Phil. 1:12-14).

Through his imprisonment, Paul was able to personally share the gospel with people whom he otherwise could never have reached—just as Jesus promised. Persecuted Christians should consider if their persecution is in some way allowing them opportunities to share the gospel that they would not have had otherwise.

Not only was the gospel being furthered by Paul as a result of his imprisonment, but his boldness in his suffering stirred others who were not imprisoned, resulting in the gospel being spread even more.

If you have ever been around someone who is sold out completely to God, it has a way of shaming you for your lack of consecration. I remember when my father was saved, he immediately began sharing the gospel and winning people to the Lord. Because I had been a

Christian longer, I felt ashamed of myself for not being as effective a soul-winner as my father. I repented and started witnessing more. As a result, there are people serving the Lord today because my father's example stirred me into action. The same was true in Paul's case. When your fellow Christians begin to be persecuted and you see their dedication to the Lord, it inspires you.

Not only does persecution have a profound effect upon Christians who witness the sufferings of their brothers and sisters, but when believers endure persecution (especially joyfully) it has a profound effect upon unbelievers. There is hardly a greater witness for the reality of Jesus than a Christian who will endure hardship for the sake of the gospel. When someone is willing to be tortured and even die for his faith, people take notice. When a believer prays for his persecutors and blesses those who curse him, it is obvious to all that he has had a miracle happen in his life. The world looks on, incredulously.

God can also use persecution for good because His people can mature during their persecutions. In that sense, persecution can be a MIT. The God who is kind and merciful to ungrateful and evil people desires that we become like Him (see Matt. 5:39-48; Luke 6:35-36). Even unbelievers love those who love them, but when we love our enemies, it reveals that we are sons of God (see Matt. 5:44-46). Persecution gives us an opportunity to manifest God's amazing love and to develop all the fruit of the Spirit.

### **How Spiritual Christians View Persecution**

Truly spiritual Christians count it a privilege to suffer for Jesus' sake.

After the early apostles were threatened by the Sanhedrin and flogged for preaching the gospel, the Bible records that they went on their way "rejoicing that they might be considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41). It is an honor when we have an opportunity to suffer for the One who suffered so much for us.

Paul expressed this same idea when he wrote to the persecuted Philippian Christians:

For to you it has been *granted* for Christ's sake [cause], not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Phil. 1:29, emphasis added).

Notice Paul said that it had been *granted* them to suffer. It must have been *God* who granted them the opportunity—not that God sent the suffering, but He obviously allowed it.

If someone *grants* you something, that usually means you're glad to get it. Why would anyone be glad to suffer for the cause of Christ? There are two main reasons.

First, as I have already said, truly spiritual Christians count it an honor to show their love for their Savior by suffering for Him. Second, because those who suffer for the cause of Christ are eventually rewarded proportionately. Jesus said:

*Blessed* are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. *Blessed* are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me.... Be glad in that day, *and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven* (Matt. 5:10-11; Luke 6:23, emphasis added).

How great is our reward in proportion to our suffering? Is it really worth it? Read what Paul said:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time *are not worthy to be compared* with the glory that is to be revealed to us.... For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory *far beyond all comparison* (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17, emphasis added).

The difference between our sufferings and the future reward is not even comparable. I suspect that those of us who experience so little persecution are going to be wishing we had suffered more once we get to heaven and compare our reward with those who were severely persecuted for their love for Jesus.

### **God's Sovereignty and Persecution**

God's sovereign control over persecution is implied in the scripture we just considered in Paul's letter to the Philippians. It said that it had been *granted* the Philippians to suffer for Christ's sake. Other scriptures make this point even more clear. Writing to persecuted Christians, Peter penned:

But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed.... For it is better, *if God should will it so*, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.... Therefore, let those also who suffer *according to the will of God* entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Pet. 3:14a, 17; 4:19, emphasis added).

You can't argue with that. Suffering persecution is something that falls under the sovereign, controlling hand of God, just as we have already noticed in the Gospels and in the book of Acts. The idea of God wanting to stop persecution, yet being unable because Satan is the god of this world, is foreign to the Bible.

### **Persecution as a Test**

Peter offered some additional insight as to why God might allow His people to be persecuted:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, *which comes upon you for your testing*, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.... If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God. For *it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God*; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?... Therefore, let those who suffer *according to the will of God* entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Pet. 4:12-14, 16-17, 19, emphasis added).

Peter plainly stated that their "fiery ordeal" came upon them for their testing. Why were they being tested? Because it was time for judgment to begin with God's household. *Judgment only falls after testing*, and God may use persecution as a test.

Again, I'm not saying that God sends persecution or inspires anyone to persecute His people. I'm just saying what the Bible plainly states: God will use persecution to test His people. Persecution flushes out phony and uncommitted believers.

Read what Jesus said to the believers in Smyrna in Revelation 2:10:

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, *that you may be tested*, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (Rev. 2:10, emphasis added).

In light of the many other biblical passages that we have studied so far about God's tests, scriptures like these should come as no surprise to us. Jesus stated that some of the Christians in Smyrna would be tested in prison and implied that some would die a martyr's death. (Notice He said nothing about how they should "believe God" and escape their imminent trials, or how they should rebuke Satan in order to avoid them.) God used their persecutions for His divine purposes.

### **Suffering Persecution for God's Glory**

Finally, sacrificially suffering for the sake of the gospel can bring glory to God. You may want to argue about that, but you'll have to argue with the Bible, not me. The apostle John recorded the following words that Jesus addressed to Peter:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself, and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go." Now this He said, signifying by *what kind of death he would glorify God* (John 21:18-19a, emphasis added).

Tradition states that Peter was crucified upside down, and the Bible plainly declared that his death glorified God. Paul also wrote that Christ would be *exalted* in his body, "whether by life or by *death*" (Phil. 1:20: emphasis added). Suffering persecution can bring glory to God.

So let's briefly review. God may permit His people to be persecuted (1) to cause them to mature, (2) to test them, (3) to discipline them, or (4) that the gospel might be furthered. Furthermore, when Christians willingly suffer for the cause of Christ, it glorifies God. Finally, those who do suffer for the cause of Christ will be abundantly rewarded in the next life. Those are all positive things, which they should be, because God is love, and He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28)!