



## Biblical Lessons from the Persecuted Church: Bearing His Cross and Building His Church for the Glory of God

by Dr. Nik Ripken and Kurt Nelson

*"Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God,"*

2 Tim 1:8

Christians who live in nations where persecution is not a normal occurrence often cringe in horror upon hearing reports that their brothers and sisters around the globe are experiencing the atrocities of suffering and death for their faith in (and their witness of) Jesus Christ. Our natural inclination is to cry out to God and to our governments to immediately put a stop to these unthinkable tragedies. But, we must pause to ask ourselves, "Are our responses biblically informed and missiologically sound?" A biblical theology of persecution creates the framework within which we can develop a proper missiology of suffering which, in turn, will enable us to have "ears to hear" essential lessons on persecution from the persecuted church worldwide.

### Definitions

For the purpose of this chapter, we define **persecution** as, "The negative reactions by governments, ideologies, societies, and families to the presence of Christ, incarnated through a positive witness by believing individuals and communities for the purpose of silencing witness."<sup>1</sup>

The most extreme form of Christian persecution is that in which a believer in Jesus Christ is killed for the practice or profession of their faith. The term **martyr** has been used of Jesus' own death at the hands of Jewish and Roman authorities, and for the persecution and related deaths of His followers for over two thousand years. Church history is replete with examples of Christian martyrs, most notably recorded by John Foxe in his book, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*.<sup>2</sup> The Church has consistently celebrated the heroic faith of those who have died for their witness for Christ, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, "A few, but only a few, of [His] followers are accounted worthy of the closest fellowship with [His] sufferings - the blessed martyrs. No other Christian is so closely identified with the form of Christ crucified."<sup>3</sup>

Recent publicity on persecution and martyrdom during the twentieth century has brought renewed attention to the usage and definition of the term "martyr" by Protestant believers, among others. Susan Bergman, in her book entitled *Martyrs* offers what she calls "the simplest understanding of martyrdom"<sup>4</sup> as occurring when a person "is required to deny Christ and live, or confess [Him] and die. Under such duress the martyr freely chooses death over life – death seals a life's belief – in order to act as a witness to the truth of Christ's claims and to his or her own faith."<sup>5</sup>

Moody Bible Institute, which has produced twenty-one graduates who have been martyred for their faith and witness, adopted the definition of a martyr as, "Those who were killed because they refused to renounce their faith or because of active opposition to their witness for Christ."<sup>6</sup> Missiologists note that, while it is inaccurate to state that "Christian martyrs always die strictly for their testimony for Christ . . . it is apparent that most Christian martyrs die in circumstances related to their witness for Christ."<sup>7</sup>

### Christian Persecution: Past and Present

When examined from a historical perspective, it is universally agreed that the early persecutors of the Church and of Christians were the Jewish leaders (32 - 64 AD), followed by the Roman State (64 - 313 AD).<sup>8</sup> Following the Roman state-led persecutions, the Catholic Church then became the principle persecutor of various "heretical" sects of Christians for the next fifteen hundred years (385 - 1870) throughout the world.<sup>9</sup> The Papacy waged persecutions against "heretics" and "heathen" across Europe and South America well into the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> It was not until 1870 that papal persecutions were officially renounced by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>11</sup> The twentieth century has seen the most dramatic upsurge in worldwide persecution beginning with the Soviet Communist empire (1917 - 1991), and the Communist regime in China (1949 - present).<sup>12</sup> Significant persecutions of Christians occurred throughout the twentieth century, including those in North Korea (1945 - present), Japan (1941 - 1945), and throughout Latin America, where the Communist dictatorship of Cuba continues to persecute Christians to the present day.<sup>13</sup> Persecutors of Christians in the

twentieth century have included Hindus in India, Buddhists in Sri Lanka, the Orthodox in Eastern Europe, Catholics in Eastern Europe and Latin America, Muslims in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, and a few remaining Communist and totalitarian regimes, among others. Paul Marshall describes the magnitude of this persecution as a “spiritual plague” affecting “over two hundred million people, with an additional four hundred million suffering from discrimination and legal impediments.”<sup>14</sup>

Those who monitor the persecution of Christians worldwide have observed that the worst perpetrators today tend to be the Islamic states (more than fifty nations) where persecution is currently at a significant level.<sup>15</sup> Marshall cites a 1997 State Department report noting that there are over sixty countries where “Christians face the reality of massacre, rape, torture, mutilation, family division, harassment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment, and even death simply for what they believe.”<sup>16</sup>

In the 2001 updated version of Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, Harold Chadwick notes that within the twentieth century, “more Christians have been killed for their faith than in all the previous centuries combined.”<sup>17</sup> Current trends at the beginning of the twenty-first century include a “wave of persecution [across] the Islamic belt from Morocco on the Atlantic eastward through to the southern Philippines.”<sup>18</sup> Other trends include the continuing threat of Communism, rising religious and ethnic nationalism, the persecution of Christians by other Christians and widespread, worldwide religious discrimination.<sup>19</sup>

## ***Biblical Perspectives***

### ***Persecution is Anticipated and Necessary in God’s Plan -***

Jesus foretold the necessity of His own persecution and death in fulfilling the mission that God the Father ordained for Him, (Mark 8:31, Luke 24:26). Christ was destined to encounter and endure violent persecution and ultimately death in order to inaugurate God’s plan for the salvation of the world. The Bible repeatedly reveals that Christ’s disciples will also encounter the same hostile responses from the world that Jesus experienced, simply because they bear witness to Him, (Matt 10:22; Mark 13:9-13; Luke 11:49, 21:12-19; 1 Pet 4:14; Rev 1:9). The sufferings of Christ naturally overflow into the lives of those who bear His name (2 Cor 1:5). Persecution is a necessary corollary of our identification with Christ. In his recent book intended to guide the twenty-first century church through the fires of persecution, Ronald Boyd-MacMillan observes that, “Persecution is the default standard of the Christian life because the world hates Christ, and we bear in our own lives the marks of that enmity.”<sup>20</sup>

### ***Persecution is Essential to Establish the Church of Jesus Christ -***

Persecution is not only a necessary axiom of identifying with and following Christ, but also is a necessary force in the extension of Christ’s Kingdom. As Valiquette concludes, “Persecution and rejection are necessary steps in the process of the coming of God’s Kingdom; they are not unfortunate and temporary setbacks.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus understood that the expansion of the Church and God’s Kingdom upon the earth would only be achieved in the context of a cosmic battle against the kingdom of darkness. Following Peter’s confession that Jesus is Messiah-God, Jesus promised to build His Church upon that reality, stating, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” (Matt 16:18). Jesus thus affirmed that His Church would be birthed in the midst of spiritual warfare in which the Church would ultimately prevail!

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Philippi instructing them, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake,” (Phil 1:29). Both saving faith and suffering for that faith are essential aspects of God’s plan for establishing the Church. Thus, Paul invites his young disciple, Timothy, to join him in preaching the gospel and in suffering for the gospel of Christ, (2 Tim 1:8). Persecution is “biblically and historically normative for the emerging Church; it cannot be avoided or eliminated.”<sup>22</sup> The Apostle Paul instructed the Church of Thessalonica that persecution was, in fact, a part of his destiny as a servant of God’s Church, (1 Thess 3:3-4).

### ***Persecution is Evil and Temporal -***

Persecution, at its core, is essentially a form of spiritual warfare that is completely evil in its origin and power. The Apostle Paul describes spiritual warfare, noting that the ultimate source of persecution of God’s people is Satan: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” (Eph 6:12). The New Testament record clearly affirms the central role that Satan played in afflicting and tempting Jesus to stray from his God-ordained mission (Matt 4:10, 16:23; Mark 1:13, 8:33; Luke 4:1-13, 22:3). Similarly, Satan opposes the faith of believers from its inception, seeking to destroy it (Mark 4:15). Satan sought to destroy the faith and ministry of Simon Peter (Luke 22:31) and entered into Judas, causing him to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3; John 13:2, 27). Satan filled the heart of Ananias and caused him to lie to the Holy Spirit about a gift to the church (Acts 5:3). He is the source of temptation and of apostasy for the Christian believer (1 Cor 7:5; 1 Tim 5:15) and hinders the work and mission of God (1 Thess 2:18). Satan is the adversary of the Christian, whom he seeks to devour and to destroy (John 10:10; 1 Pet 5:8), and he is the deceiver of the whole world (Rev 12:9).

Intermediate sources of persecution of Christians include the fallen “world system” (John 15:18-21) as well as people who oppose the work of God (Matt 5:11, 44). Notable in the New Testament record is the identification of religious and political systems and authorities as persecutors of Christian believers, and, therefore, of Christ’s Church (Matt 10:17-23, 23:34; Luke 11:49, 21:12; Acts 8:1, 9:4-5, 13:50, 22:7-8, 26:14-15; Phil 3:6). If persecution is evil, then it is also, by necessity, temporal and ultimately destined to cease to exist. This will occur at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ when Satan will be forever vanquished, and God’s Kingdom will eternally destroy the forces of evil and darkness.

The Bible repeatedly offers a perspective which juxtaposes the present suffering of believers (which is referred to as “light and momentary”) in contrast to the future of Christians, which is described as being filled with “eternal glory,” (Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17-18; Col 3:1-4). Christians are urged to keep this eternal perspective in mind in order to help them endure evil (but temporal) persecutions.

### ***Satan’s Purpose: The Goals of the Persecutors***

Though there are not extensive biblical texts related to the goal or motive of the persecutors, the Apostle Paul’s testimony of his own pre-conversion motives as a religious persecutor of Christians provides sufficient insight. Paul states that his personal goal in persecuting Christians was to force them to blaspheme against Christ (Acts 26:11). He acknowledges that he sought to destroy the Church (Gal 1:13) and to destroy the Christian faith (Gal 1:23). Jesus acknowledged that the purpose of the persecutors was to cause His followers to “turn away” or “fall away” from their faith (Matt 11:6, 24:10, 26:31) and to hate and betray each other (Matt 24:10). Nik Ripken observes the following:

*Believers living in the midst of persecution suggest strongly that the goal of Satan is not to beat, torture or kill believers. The goal of Satan and his persecutors, suffering believers remind us, is to silence believers, to make believers lose (or give up) their voice, and to diminish witness. Also, the persecutors strive to silence witness as covertly as possible. The most successful persecution happens when an immediate family member, a boss, a spouse, or the culture in general, pressures the convert into remaining quiet, keeping faith “personal.” The persecutors want to relegate faith to the environs of the Western world. Or they desire that faith be practiced only within the walls of a few church buildings that are closely monitored by the state or the local religious authorities.<sup>23</sup>*

### ***God’s Purposes: The Value of Persecution***

Admittedly, we cannot fully comprehend all of God’s purposes in allowing Christ’s followers to be persecuted. Only those purposes which are clearly articulated in Scripture may be known to us, and they are few in number. The book of Acts records the fact that the early believers left Jerusalem and scattered to other key cities as a result of intense persecution (Acts 11:19). Here, one may conclude that God purposed to use persecution to spread and multiply the Church. Persecution serves to test and strengthen one’s faith (Rom 5:3-4; Jas 1:3, 1 Pet 1:6-7, 4:12). There is a mysterious purpose in persecution and suffering related to bringing about the Kingdom of God (2 Thess 1:4-5). Scripture tells us that Jesus was “perfected” as the author of salvation and in His obedience through suffering (Heb 2:10, 5:8-10). This principle has limited but valid application to God’s purposes for suffering in the lives of Christian leaders. And, finally, one of God’s purposes in affliction and suffering is to equip His servants with the ability to comfort and sustain others who endure similar afflictions (2 Cor 1:3-11).

### ***Responding Wisely to Persecution: “Do’s and Don’ts”***

The protocol for many well-meaning advocacy groups, in response to persecution, often reflects a four-fold agenda that aims to:

- 1 Stop the persecution
- 2 Punish the persecutors
- 3 Promote Western forms of government and democracy
- 4 Raise money to aid in assisting in the rescue or resourcing of persecuted believers

However, a biblical missiology of persecution might lead us to respond differently. Understanding that persecution and martyrdom are predicted and necessary (though temporal) evils which are allowed in God’s plan to establish His church and to inaugurate His Kingdom on the earth might argue for different responses. Understanding that Satan’s goal is to silence witness, either by the intimidation or elimination of believers, might further motivate other ways and objectives in responding to persecution.

And, finally, understanding that God has allowed the evil of persecution to serve His sovereign purposes to expand, purify, strengthen and then multiply His Kingdom upon the earth leads us to respond differently to persecution as witnesses of Jesus’ example to another course of

responses to the persecution of Christian believers. Following are some helpful “Do’s and Don’ts” which we have gleaned from the persecuted church to better inform Christians’ responses to the present reality of persecution:

### **DON'TS:**

**1** Do not model fear for those who suffer persecution – When believers who live and minister in the midst of persecution are asked, “What have you learned from the western missionary;” too often their replies have been sobering. “Western missionaries teach us to be afraid.” This is not a missiological mistake, it is a sin.

**2** Do not continue unwise mission tactics or practices which expose those under persecution to greater and unnecessary risks – In spite of all that we have been taught in our literate seminaries about how the Bible progressed from its oral to written forms, it did not take God, in the New Testament era, twenty to sixty years to become literate. God could have had His writers pen the words as they happened, but He was too wise to do that. God kept His word in oral forms until the days when those in the stories had joined Him in heaven or were no longer at risk. Putting the stories of believers in persecution (even motivated by advocacy on their behalf) in literate forms, in real time, often increases their persecution. The church and its workers need to learn how to advocate and share their stories orally, writing this generation’s stories for the succeeding generation. Believers in persecution are often harmed for their relationships with the outsider. They are targeted because of with whom they work and worship. Singling out believers and hiring them in environments with high unemployment will double their security in-country. When local believers are observed regularly worshipping with westerners, or have outsiders frequent their homes (to the exception of the broader lost community) persecution is heightened. Missionaries should avoid taking the place of the local church when it comes to caring for local believers financially, or by providing a place or culture for worship. Even in places where the majority of the populations are oral communicators, western workers have the practice of handing out the written word of God in a “wholesale fashion.” Too often these oral communicators are persecuted for being found with a Bible that they cannot read, but they could not refuse such a lavish gift from the visiting outsider. The least that western workers should do in these settings is to tell the recipient that their gift is indeed a Bible, and ask them if they desire the gift, would they be able to read it or have someone that could safely read it for them? The goal is not to make any soul afraid from the first witness, but is to model for them wisdom. This may also serve to give greater perceived value to God’s word. In environments framed by severe persecution, paying local believers to evangelize (often

using western methods of sharing one’s faith) can be extremely dangerous. This writer has experienced such practices where there was 90% unemployment. Muslims came to the evangelist asking for a job with “those Christians who are paying for salvations. I need also to feed my family.” In this setting, most of those hired by the outsiders are now dead.

**3** Do not extract persecuted believers out of their country or people group context to safety – After conducting hundreds of interviews among those living in persecution, it can be noted that approximately 50% of local believers are extracted to a place or country of safety by western missionaries once persecution becomes serious. Among believers from within Islam, this percentage is as high as 70%. It would be difficult to plant churches in the United States, the United Kingdom, or anywhere in the western Christian world if 70% of those baptized were extracted to other countries. This also models fear and a nonbiblical missiology of suffering. Jesus did not command His followers to stay within persecution, placing children and others at risk no matter the cost. His advice was to flee to next city, the next village, the next location inhabited by extended family. The goal as much as possible must be staying within one’s people group, not forsaking a bold witness continually within their midst. God did command Joseph to take Jesus to Egypt for the following three years of Herod’s reign, but the intention was always to return. Those we extract almost never return. One question that can be asked is, “How do we know when it is within the will of God for ‘our’ Joseph to spend a season in Pharaoh’s prison?” It is always easier when it is “someone else’s” Joseph. To rescue prematurely, no matter how good the intentions, would have led to the starvation of both the Egyptians and the Jews.

**4** Do not flee as missionaries or ministers of the gospel – As faith is shared among the nations, the Bible is clear; both those that give witness and receive witness will often be called upon to pay a price for their godliness. What risks is the foreign missionary willing to assume when it includes risks to our children? Now there is not a call here for an absence of common sense. Throughout spiritual history there are places on the globe where the missionary would, perhaps, be unwise to minister, at least initially, with a spouse and children. Where violence reigns and precedes the barest opportunity for witness it may be wise to consider the sending of one spouse and/or singles into traumatic environments. As civil war and violence ease, it may become possible for couples to minister together fruitfully. It may take another season of the fledgling mission before it becomes prudent for families with children to incarnate a Biblical witness more fully within the matrix of their host society. Yet should the western missionary be the last in and first out? Never! Globally, those serving in the military, the United Nations,

and those in the building and engineering trades are taking great risks for the cause of humanity, nationality and financial gain. In the worst environments, people serve for various reasons and ideologies. Should not Christ trump any other reason for going to places defined as high risk?

**5** Do not withhold your witness, do the work of an evangelist – The number one cause of persecution is souls coming to Jesus. We cannot change that. What we must do is to pray to be found worthy of sharing in His sufferings. Often it is problematic when God gives new missionaries fruit early in their ministries in areas rife with persecution. What often occurs is that these new workers will then spend 90% of their time “pastoring” these 10-15 new believers, relegating evangelism to a secondary ministry. Can it be suggested that the role of a missionary is different, while complementary to, the role of a pastor? Pastors gather and minister to those that are within the kingdom. Missionaries intentionally strive to remain among the lost.

**6** Do not run from persecution – and do not seek it – If you or a team member fears and always flees from persecution, you have a serious problem. Conversely, if you or a team member seeks out persecution and suffering, then find counseling, and seek to be restored to emotional and spiritual health. Persecution in and of itself is neither good nor bad, it just is. When it comes to giving a consistent and bold witness, the issue is not one of living in a political, social or religious environment that is defined by freedom or persecution. One is equally free to share Jesus in Saudi Arabia as they are in the United States. At all times and in all places we are equally free to share Christ with those outside of the Kingdom of God. The commandment to be a witness was never predicated upon political freedom. Witness is tied not to governments or to one’s social setting; it is firmly aligned with obedience. Everyone is free to share Christ in every environment if one is willing to suffer the consequences of their obedient witness. God determines our political and social setting. We determine if we will be obedient within that setting.

**7** Do not regret when those who come to saving faith in Christ are persecuted – The Bible is clear: it is an honor to share in the sufferings of Christ and to be found worthy of His cross. Let’s be clear: persecution and suffering for any reason, even for Jesus, is never fun and should never be sought. Persecution is truly blood, sweat, and tears. It is separation from those you love, incarceration, abuse, humiliation, having one’s children grow up without a father or a mother, and yet, it was exactly this that the early Church did: their willingness to remain faithful witnesses, to suffer and die authenticated their faith in Christ. When brothers and sisters are paying big prices for their faith it is the church’s task to intercede for them. It is a divine opportunity for the local church to care for their families

and never to forget them. We should constantly remind them, and ourselves, that their suffering is for Jesus.

**DO’S:**

**1** . Do accept the hard truth that persecution is normal, and prepare yourself and others for that reality - Pastors in the former USSR describe persecution as being as normal as to the “sun coming up in the east.” When asked repeatedly why they had not written down the impressive and heartbreaking stories of their sufferings, persecution, and martyrdom under Communism so that we in the west would have a record of their stories they asked in reply, “When did you chaps in the west stop reading the Bible? From Genesis to Revelation the Word is filled with the accounts of those choosing to follow God and consequently paying a big price for doing so.”

**2** . Do pray - Believers living the midst of persecution call us to intervention through prayer. They call Western Christians who are not themselves in the midst of overt suffering to pray: to pray not that persecution for other believers might end, but that the persecuted would be obedient in the midst of their suffering. Obedient to what? Obedient to endure and to share, especially with their persecutors, the forgiveness and love that is found through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>24</sup> “Ask the persecuted, ‘How can we help you?’ and you will invariably find that their first answer is ‘Pray for us!’ Usually their second answer is ‘Pray for us!’ And their third answer is ‘Pray for us!’ There is absolutely no question that when it comes to tactical assistance, it is prayer that the persecuted crave more than anything else from their less persecuted brothers and sisters.”<sup>25</sup>

**3** . Do focus on “lostness,” taking risks for the gospel - Believers in persecution ask the western missionary to model for them how to take risks among those who still remain outside the kingdom of God. They define a missionary as one who was made for lostness. Conversely, they note that most western missionaries take the bulk of their risks among those already saved, those within the kingdom of God. Where, they ask, are missionaries getting into trouble, coming to the attention of the authorities, the persecutors? Many times it is at the point of immersing oneself within the functions of emerging or existing churches; in corporate worship with locals, at baptisms, and the Lord’s Supper. Local believers ask the western worker to model taking risks rather among their neighbors, the corrupt policeman, the customs officer, the shop owner, and those they meet at tea and coffee shops. “Model for us,” they state, “how to do the task of a missionary primarily among those who have yet to enter into the kingdom of God. Will you risk a bold witness, allowing us to gather and minister to the sheep?”

**4** Do be tough in the face of suffering – It requires physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual toughness to stay the course in the face of suffering and persecution, especially when Satan attacks one’s fruit (new disciples). Few things are more devastating to the western missionary than when the fruit of their witness suffers for their new found faith, often while the outsider goes unscathed. Recognize this as spiritual warfare that needs to be resisted and rebuked. Satan loves to persecute one’s fruit and then make the one who gave a bold, faithful witness feel guilty for being obedient!

**5** Do be bold in your personal witness – Start now. Often missionaries answer a call to overseas missions, anticipating sharing Christ with the nations, while they have been lukewarm in their witness within their own families and culture. One is to be a bold witness as they go from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and among the nations. Set goals for how often you will share your faith. Covenant with God in regard to how many people you desire to see come to Him and be gathered into house churches. Answer four questions for yourself which lead to effective witness: 1) What will I say? 2) Who will I say it to? 3) Who will hold me accountable as to whether I witness or remain silent? 4) What do I do when they say “yes” to my witness?

**6** Do prepare missionaries and national workers to suffer in the midst of persecution – Thankfully, but slowly, western workers are moving ever deeper among those who are dangerously unreached. It is becoming more common for western missionaries to suffer individually and as families. Martyrdom of western workers becomes more common as obedience deepens. The time to prepare followers of Christ for the cost of “cross bearing” is within the confines of their local churches. If the task is delayed until crosscultural workers arrive at their respective missionary training centers, or worse, after they arrived on their respective mission fields - it is too late. The western church has a non-biblical missiology of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. The western church must return to her biblical roots and embrace a bold witness to the nations, whatever the cost.

**7** Do become culturally astute in order to minimize unnecessary persecution – The number one way to reduce persecution for secondary reasons is to learn the local language and culture. As missionaries become competent in sharing Christ as much as possible as an insider, persecution caused by the outsider is significantly reduced. The converse is sadly true. The more that one operates as a “missionary tourist,” then the more persecution as related to the outsider escalates. This is not brain surgery. Those that came to Christ in the New Testament era came to Him through a local or regional language. When God reveals Himself through dreams and visions He always appears to the lost one in their heart

language. Short-term mission trips are valuable, but the goal must always be to retain a long-term commitment by someone who is astute in local language and culture.

**8** Do continue to deploy workers, especially areas of greatest “lostness” – Depending upon whose figures one uses, 70% to 80% of all western missionaries are deployed within the reached, Christian world. It takes intentionality for churches, mission agencies and missionaries to deliberately stay among the “wolves.” We are drawn to those who are most like us as believers. Church can be a place of worship, but it can also become a place to hide from the lost world. Missionaries are very accomplished at recognizing open doors and developing entry strategies. Generally, we do a very poor job of developing exit strategies and we stay too long. Staying until one’s denomination is established will, perhaps, deny millions outside of Christ their opportunity to hear, to understand, and to believe the gospel, and to have a culturally sensitive church planted in their midst.

**9** Do persevere in work and witness for the extension of Christ’s Kingdom – The Apostles were so shrewd missiologically within this juncture of the missionary journey. Some workers sowed the gospel seed while others watered the emerging faith, (1 Cor 3:6). Yet, it is always God that brings the harvest. Hebrews 12 speaks of the “clouds of witnesses” that the sovereign God uses to bring faith into fruition. Historically, mission fields are filled with accounts of those who serve sacrificially all of their lives with little fruit as a result. Generations later, standing on the shoulders of the saints that went before them, missionaries witness a great harvest.

### *Perseverance and the Glory of God*

As believers share in experiencing Christ’s sufferings, and persevere in their faith, then God is glorified in the end. The Apostle Paul writes to the Church in Rome to tell the believers there, “and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him,” (Rom 8:17). To the Church in Colosse, Paul writes to exhort them to set their hearts and minds “on things above” where Christ is and where their eternal life is, so that when Jesus appears, “then you also will appear with Him in glory,” (Col 3:2-4).

The singular strategy promoted in the New Testament for persevering in the face of persecution is that found in the exhortation to remain focused upon Jesus’ person and presence as “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2b), and to consider His personal example of persevering through persecution (Heb 12:3). The Apostle John also recognized that the source of our perseverance is to be found “in Jesus” (Rev 1:9). Thus, it is not surprising that the first martyr, Stephen, when being stoned to death

for his faith, gazed into heaven and saw Jesus, and cried out to Him to receive his spirit (Acts 7:55-60). Focusing on Jesus' example, His person, and His presence is the unique strategy offered in New Testament exhortations to the Christian who would successfully endure persecution.

### Helpful Perspectives Motivating Perseverance

Jesus taught His followers that those who abide in His Word "will know the truth, and the truth will set [them] free," (John 8:32). A number of key passages in His Word are extremely motivating in encouraging the believer to persevere in the face of persecution. These New Testament perspectives greatly encourage and inspire perseverance through tribulation and persecution:

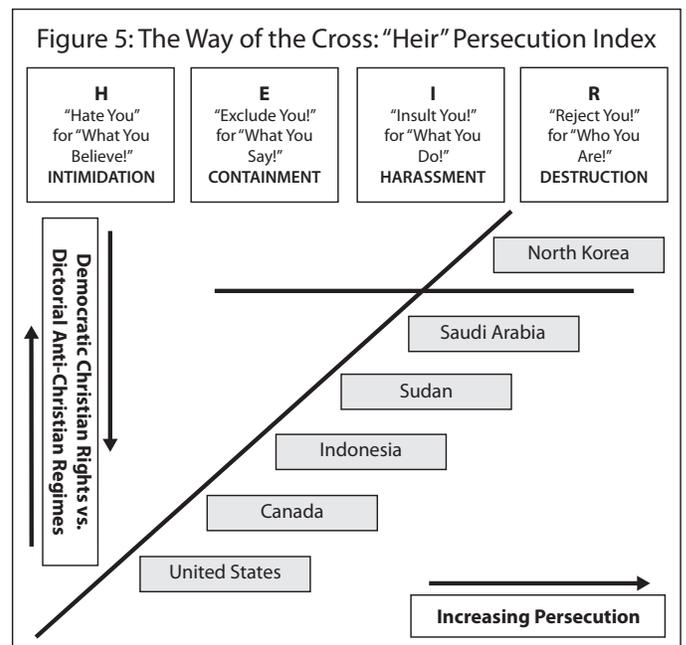
- 1 It is a great honor to be persecuted (Matt 5:10-11; 2 Thess 1:5; Heb 11:26)
- 2 Persecution results in our good and our growth (Rom 5:3; Jas 1:2-4)
- 3 The persecuted will receive a heavenly reward (Matt 5:12; 2 Thess 1:7-10; Jas 1:12)
- 4 Persecution can never separate us from the love of God (Rom 8:35-39)
- 5 Persecution cannot conquer our faith (Rom 8:33-39)
- 6 God limits our persecution according to His will (2 Cor 4:8-9)
- 7 God is our sole deliverer (2 Tim 3:11)
- 8 God will ultimately avenge the persecuted (2 Thess 1:6)
- 9 Persecution (rightly endured) reveals Jesus to the world (2 Cor 4:8-11)
- 10 Persecution is spiritual (not human or physical) warfare and the battle must be fought spiritually (2 Cor 10:3-5; Eph 6:10-20)

Understanding and embracing these New Testament perspectives on persecution in the context of a comprehensive New Testament theology of persecution and appropriate Christian response can effectively prepare, equip and galvanize the follower of Christ to victoriously endure persecution. Such endurance and perseverance will glorify God and further the gospel witness of our Lord Jesus Christ for whom we suffer.

In closing, the response of the Apostles, after having been flogged and ordered by the High Priest and the Sanhedrin to cease speaking further in the name of Jesus, is a great

pattern for believers to follow today, "Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ," (Acts 5:41-42).

Their two-fold response was to rejoice that they had been persecuted for the name of Christ, and to continue both publicly and privately proclaiming the good news of Jesus the Messiah. "Joy" and "bold witness" in the face of opposition and persecution should mark every disciple of Jesus until he returns to fully establish God's Kingdom and to receive His Church as His perfect bride for all eternity! To God be the glory!



*Suggested caption:  
"The spectrum of twenty-first century persecution"*

<sup>1</sup> Nik Ripken, "A Missiology of Suffering: Witness and Church Planting in the Midst of Persecution" (paper presented during MIS 9451 doctoral studies class at Columbia International University, Columbia, SC, January 2006).

<sup>2</sup> John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (ed. Harold J. Chadwick; Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1995), 302; repr. of *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1959); trans. of *Nachfolge* (trans. R.H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, ed.; München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1937).

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<sup>7</sup> James C. and Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1996), 9.

<sup>8</sup> J. M'Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (vol. 7-8; New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1969), 963.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>15</sup> Christian Freedom International, "Remember the Persecuted," n.p. [cited 15 March 2007]. Online: <http://www.christianfreedom.org/images/ourresources/annual%20report.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Marshall, "Present Day Persecution of Christians," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24, no. 1(2000), 19-30.

<sup>17</sup> Foxe, 425.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Marshall, ed., *Religious Freedom in the World: A Global Report on Freedom and Persecution* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Boyd-MacMillan, *Faith That Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell Publishers, 2006), 109.

<sup>21</sup> Hilaire Valiquette, "Handed Over to the Gentiles: The Centrality of Persecution for Missiology" *Missiology: An International Review* 26, no. 4 (1998), 431-443.

<sup>22</sup> Mohit Gupta, "Servants in the Crucible: Findings from a Global Study on Persecution and the Implications for Sending Agencies and Sending Churches" (paper presented during MIS 9451 doctoral studies class at Columbia International University, Columbia, SC, January 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Ripken, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ripken, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Boyd-MacMillan, 255-256.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Estabrooks and Jim Cunningham, eds., *Standing Strong Through the Storm*, (Santa Ana: Open Doors International, Inc., 2004), 73-74.