

Why Does God Permit Persecution?

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"Mr. Wilson:

I recently came across your website. Your article on the rapture is a challenge. I have been 100% convinced of a pre-tribulation rapture for more than twenty years, but in recent weeks my confidence in this doctrine is not as secure as it once was.

Your article raised some good questions that I had not considered. One issue bothers me a great deal. Why does God permit His people to be persecuted and killed during the Great Tribulation? Didn't God rescue Noah? Lot? Joseph? Rahab? Daniel and others? Doesn't the Bible say that God's people will not suffer wrath? (1 Thessalonians 1:10) I hope you will reply.

Sincerely,
Paul"

Dear Paul:

Thank you for your question. I am pleased to learn that you are searching for more truth. I am sure the Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth as you study God's Word. (John 16:13) I am not here to tell anyone what to believe. You have asked a very good question that I have asked myself.

I have found some points from Scripture that may be helpful to you in your own search for truth. Each believer must assemble God's truth for himself and live according to what he believes is right and true. After you read this response, I hope you will go back to our website and reread the article on the rapture. If you do this, several pieces of the puzzle may "snap together" and make a lot more sense the second time around.

To begin, you need to know that persecution and true Christianity are inseparable. Jesus warned His disciples: **"Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. . . . They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me."** (John 15:20,21)

Later, Jesus warned His disciples again, **"All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. . . ."** (John 16:1-4)

Looking into the future, the Bible warns that God's saints are going to be persecuted: "**The [leopard-like] beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. . . . He [the leopard-like beast] was given power to make war against *the saints and to conquer them.* And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation.**" (Revelation 13:5-7, italics and insertion mine)

Those who stand up for righteousness are often persecuted. Jesus said, "**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**" (Matthew 5:10-12)

The apostle Peter understood persecution and the importance of not giving up. He wrote, "**So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good [regardless of the consequences].**" (1 Peter 4:19, insertion mine)

Please consider one more text: "**He [the little horn] will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him [the little horn] for a time, times and half a time.**" (Daniel 7:25, italics and insertions mine)

Who handed the saints over to the little horn power if not God? For reasons beyond the scope of this article, this prophecy was fulfilled during the Dark Ages. (A.D. 538 - 1798) During this time period, some historians calculate that more than fifty million Christians died for their faith. An inescapable fact is that in the past, God *handed* His saints over to the little horn for 1,260 years and it is not inconsistent that He should *hand* His saints over to the leopard-like beast for forty-two months in the future.

Look at Persecution from God's Point of View

Persecution for Christ's sake is a challenge, but God does not view persecution as we do. According to His infinite wisdom and love, God is able to achieve things for and through His saints when they are persecuted that He cannot achieve otherwise. Please consider the following:

Persecution for Christ's sake purifies our devotion to Christ. When people are persecuted for humbly obeying the will of God, there is no room for bitterness or anger toward their predators. God's people accept, *through faith*, that it is His will that they should stand firm, paying the price that His truth demands. (Remember that Jesus uttered the phrase "Father forgive them" on the cross (Luke 23:34), and Stephen uttered the same phrase when the stones were flying. Acts 7)

When faced with persecution for Christ's sake, a bundle of God's grace is delivered. The Holy

Spirit empowers the saint to deal with the situation. God's Word becomes paramount and everyone involved is affected – even if they do not comprehend all that is taking place.

The fires of persecution separate the faith-full (the gold) from the faith-less (the dross). When the Great Tribulation begins, everyone who obeys the first angel's message will face persecution. Our Creator's demand to worship Him on the seventh day will stand in direct opposition to Babylon's demand that we worship God on the first day.

When persecution begins, many Christians will discover that they really do not have faith in Christ. They will cry out, "Oh God, how could You let this calamity happen to me?"

Peter's experience is recorded in the Bible because he perfectly mirrors the difference between admission and submission. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter was bold, ready to die for his Lord. When the mob rushed into the garden to lay hands on Jesus, Peter whipped out his knife and a scuffle ensued. He managed to cut off the right ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant. (John 18:10) Six hours later, he denied three times that he even knew Jesus. What caused Peter to do this?

Peter did not know it, but he had no faith in God. Peter had played the "admission game." He admitted that Jesus was the Messiah. (Matthew 16:16) Peter admitted that he was prepared to die for his master, ". . . **'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.'** **And all the other disciples said the same.**" (Matthew 26:35)

And sure enough, when the mob showed up, Peter proved that he was ready to fight and die for Christ's sake, but his motive was self-defense. Peter was self-seeking and he was willing to die, if necessary, to get what he wanted.

Six hours later, Peter saw Jesus submit to persecution and condemnation without any self defense. Christ's humility humiliated Peter. He felt betrayed and he responded with betrayal. Peter was not prepared to accept the Father's will for Jesus. It was the Father's will that Jesus go to the cross and Peter did not seek the same destiny as Christ.

It is one thing to die in self defense or in defense of God and country, but it is altogether another matter to die for no other reason than God requires it. This is the element in Isaac's story that is so amazing. He was willing to die on the altar without resistance or complaint.

Jesus said, "**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself** [lay aside self-interests] **and take up his cross** [the will of God] **and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.**" (Matthew 16:24,25, insertions mine)

After the rooster crowed a third time, Peter had an epiphany. He began to understand the meaning of submission to the will of God. When Peter saw Israel's Messiah, the Son of God, submitting to inhumane treatment because this was the Father's will for Christ, Peter became ashamed of himself.

Peter saw through his tears that faith in God means total submission to God's will and this includes suffering because of righteousness. Jesus' persecution changed Peter and millions of people since who have studied the life of Jesus.

Persecution purifies the soul of the persecuted and in this process, God allows us to see if self has been set aside so that the will of God can be fulfilled. Jesus said, "**This third I will bring into the fire** [of persecution]; **I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, 'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.'**" (Zechariah 13:9, insertion mine)

Persecution also keeps faith in Christ vibrant! When Jesus spoke to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, the Christian faith was only sixty-five years old. Already, six of the seven churches in Asia Minor were corrupted by false doctrines, but the church at Philadelphia was hanging on. Because religion mutates quickly, God allowed the devil to chase His people into the desert for 1,260 years. (Revelation 12:6,14) God knows the desert is a good place for training people.

This is why He took Israel into the desert when they first came out of Egypt. I like to call God's desert training, "Desert University." When a person is exiled to the desert, he has to depend upon God for everything. The desert is an unforgiving place, a hostile place, a lonely place, a place that forbids self-indulgence and self-reliance.

The carnal nature hates the desert. Instead, it wants pleasure, luxury, and the "easy life." Even though there is very little pleasure in the desert, a person can find joy in the desert. True joy expands the ability of the heart to trust God and serve man. True joy redirects our motives from self-seeking to selfless service.

"Desert U" teaches discernment and insight. "Desert U" is a holistic experience called sanctification, or in Bible terms, "walking with God." "**This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked** [alone] **with God.**" (Genesis 6:9, italics and insertion mine) Looking at human nature and knowing that God's wisdom is perfect, we have to admit that putting the saints in the desert for 1,260 years had to be the best thing that God could do for them.

Attending "Desert U" is like putting on a blindfold and after taking hold of Christ's arm, following wherever He leads. There is no way to know where you are going, but your destination is secure! God's people often find themselves all alone in their faith experience. Family and friends rarely understand or appreciate "Desert U."

In fact, family and friends are often opposed to God's will because they do not know God's will. Jesus said, "**A man's enemies will be the members of his own household.**" (Matthew 10:36) I have mentioned these matters because there is a special sense of joy at "Desert U." God is there. If necessary, food falls from the sky and water flows from rocks. "**The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God**" (Revelation 12:6, italics mine)

The final benefit that comes from persecution is exclusion. Persecution keeps those who love

the world and the things of this world out of God's church. (1 John 2:15) When the threshold for being a Christian is suffering, the nucleus of God's people remains pure.

When the threshold for being a Christian is easy, religion mutates and the gospel suffers. The saints become invalids when they should be soldiers of the cross. Instead of being medics to a dying world, church members constantly need a medic to keep them alive.

God's saints do not serve Him because they want to avoid Hell and win Heaven. God's saints would serve God even if there is nothing beyond this life. That is what Jesus did. He would have gone to the cross for you and me even if there was no resurrection.

The saints serve God because He imparts love, peace, joy, and sustaining grace. (Galatians 5:22) This grace comes through total submission to God's will. This grace enables the saints to "overcome the world." **"They [the saints] overcame him [the devil] by [their faith in] the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."** (Revelation 12:11)

The apostle Paul wrote, **"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."** (2 Timothy 3:12) If persecution was a bad thing for God's people, He would not permit it. God does not view persecution as we do because His grace is sufficient. Listen to Paul, a man who knew persecution well: **"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear."**

But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) God's saints should not fret over past, present, or future persecution. If we surrender to God's will today, He will give us every grace to glorify His wonderful name today. Today is all that we have.

In closing, consider Peter's words, the apostle who made an about face once he understood God's will: **"Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."**

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.

Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.

But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were

called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:12-21)

Larry Wilson