

## CHAPTER NINE

### Tried by Fire, Refined as Gold

In *How Firm a Foundation*, a hymn dating back to 1787, we sing of God's faithfulness even as we are tested and tried:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace all sufficient shall be thy supply.  
The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design,  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

The trying and testing of our faith is a fact of life: Second Timothy 3:12 promises that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." That is not a verse most of us enjoy reading. It tells us, in essence, that if we do what we are most called to do, live godly lives in Christ, we can expect to receive that which we most want to avoid: punishment from the world.

The problem is not with the theology of that verse, but with our understanding of faith. We are to live lives that mirror the life of Christ. We fail at that, of course, but that is the ideal—to live like Christ, in his power. Why, then, should it surprise us that when we do that, we should also be mistreated? Was Christ not misunderstood, ridiculed, misrepresented, and mistreated? Was he not unjustly accused of crimes he did not commit? Was he not subjected to an illegal procedure that violated both Jewish and Roman law? And in the end, although he was without sin and spoke absolute truth and acted in perfect conformity with God's law, did he not suffer torture and execution? Even one of the criminals on the cross next to him, suffering his own execution, had to acknowledge that Jesus was totally undeserving of the punishment he was receiving.

The history of those who have taken a stand for God in godless surroundings has been one of persecution. When Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank" (Daniel 1:8), he was tested. When he refused to stop praying to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he was thrown to the lions. When his three fellow believers persisted in their godliness, they were tried in the bin of persecution. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were tossed in a furnace so hot the palace guards who threw them in were burned alive by the flames (see Daniel 3:22).

The history of God's prophets is filled with persecution of the worst kind. Just moments before becoming the first Christian martyr, Stephen reminded his executioners, "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?" (Acts 7:52). Stephen was soon followed by James, who was executed by the sword (Acts 12:1-2). It looked as if Peter would be next, as he was arrested when the early church started to grow, but he was miraculously saved through the direct intervention of God's messenger. Paul's missionary journeys in the book of Acts are replete with stonings, beatings, illegal arrests, and imprisonment. Many of his letters were written from the inside of jail cells. Yet much was accomplished while he was in chains.

The example of the early Church bears out Paul's warning: If we intend to live godly lives, we will suffer persecution at the hands of God's enemies.

In the latter days we are promised that iniquity shall abound And love will grow cold (Matthew 24:12). That is a powerful and Disturbing thought. Love will literally escape from the world in the last days, like air from a leaking tire. At the same time, the love of Christ, which will be evident in his people, will be ever more apparent, and even more miraculous!

In the final days, the Church must be prepared to be delivered up to the authorities, to be afflicted, or even killed. Christians can expect to be "hated by an nations" for the sake of Jesus Christ, according to Matthew 24:9. At the same time, the message of the gospel will be seen most clearly and most powerfully in our beaten and persecuted bodies.

Remember, as Christ hung on the cross, one of the criminals hanging with him was saved by the power of his witness amid suffering. As he lived out the message of his ministry in the manner of his death, Christ shook the battle-hardened heart of a Roman centurion. The guard was standing right in front of him, and he had a front-row seat to every detail of the agonizing and unjust persecution of the Lord of lords. When it was through, he could only declare, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39).

### **The Future of Persecution**

John, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives us the future of the Christian Church. It was no accident that God picked him, the apostle of both love and suffering, to be the receptacle of God's picture of the future Church: abounding in love While experiencing unimaginable suffering.

Through the vision imparted to him by God, John gives us a description of seven churches that handle the challenges of persecution and trial in a variety of ways.

The church in Ephesus, described in Revelation 2:1-7, is a picture of believers who are pure in their doctrine, but who miss an essential of the faith. That church was bold and fearless in exposing false teachers, and its members persevered in the face of strong persecution. However, they were lacking in one important regard: They had grown cold in their love of God. When persecution comes, it will not simply be the rightness of our doctrine that will change hearts; it will be our devotion to the Savior and our declaration of love to those who persecute us that reveals the true nature of God to the world.

The church at Smyrna, in Revelation 2:8-11, is the fiercely persecuted church. It suffers tribulation, poverty, prison, and even worse. To them God says, "Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life." In those few words there is a universe of meaning. Persecution can lead to separation from husbands, wives, children, and friends. It can mean a cold, forgotten jail cell and hearing the boots of the executioners as they come for us with mechanical, uncaring faces. It might mean pain and death in a lonely and forgotten place, surrounded by filth, indignity, and hate. There are Christians who are suffering like that today around the world. Yet the Lord tells us, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer.... He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death." Only when we get God's view of eternity and of our future with him can we understand how we can be true overcomers. Against those who know the Father of heaven, death can never claim victory.

In the church at Pergamum, the followers of Jesus are praised for being faithful to the cause of Christ, even while being surrounded by the worst of the pagan and anti-Christian world. Yet John, in Revelation 2:12-17, warns them that they have been too tolerant of false teaching. Pergamum was the Washington, D.C. of the ancient world. It had the second largest library of that day and was home to some of the greatest temples dedicated to Caesar. It was an obvious seat of political and cultural power. We can reasonably speculate that the church there had bowed to the influence of its surroundings. When persecution comes, it is easy to tolerate compromise, and we can easily rationalize how our bending in matters of truth will not hurt anything, compared to the pain of persecution. But in God's view, compromise when it comes to truth is not an option.

The church at Thyatira had a similar problem. In addition to tolerating false teachings, it willfully engaged in immoral and sinful conduct in Revelation 2:18-29, God's judgment on that church is clear and awesome: sickness, death, and pestilence. To those who keep themselves pure and faithful, however, they are promised to be part of God's ruling and eternal kingdom. We are being prepared for an invisible city that is not made by human hands. Even in the midst of pressure from a pagan world, we must always conduct ourselves as ambassadors for God's city.

When the heat and pressure of tribulation come, one unfortunate response can be to merely go through the motions of a Christian walk while being spiritually dead. The church at Sardis is described as "alive, but you are dead." Believers there are told in Revelation 3:1-6 to "wake up, and strengthen the things that remain." The time for sleep is not when you're walking through the challenges of the future.

The church at Philadelphia was relatively powerless in the measurements of the world. It was small, and had "little power." Philadelphia was not a major center, but a small area with a limited population located in a spot plagued by earthquakes. Yet in Revelation 3:7-13, God reminded this modest group of believers that he had not forgotten them. "I know your deeds," He assures them. Because they had been faithful to his name amid, persecution, and had kept God's Word, the believers were given great spiritual power. They were blessed with an open door of gospel opportunity "which no one can shut." Persecution ultimately reduces the persecuted to a position of being powerless. That is when we must rely on the power of God, who does not forget us, and who will never abandon us. Praise God that he rescues his remnant of faithful followers!

Last, and perhaps most sadly, is the church at Laodicea. That city was a major banking center, and was located in what was considered a prosperous area. It received its water source from hot springs some six miles away, but by the time the water got to Laodicea it was neither hot nor cold. It was simply tepid-lukewarm. The wealth and prosperity that surrounded the city had infected the faith of this church. In Revelation 3:14-22, we read Christ's shocking reaction: "I will spit you out of my mouth." The corrupting effect of prosperity and self-indulgence can be devastating. Better to be poor and persecuted than rich but disenfranchised from God himself.

Regardless of the circumstances of our persecution, we are commanded to "hold fast." That is one of those commands that seems easy to understand, and yet sometimes impossible to apply. How do we "hold fast" when we know that the job promotion was denied because we have shared our faith at work? How do we "hold fast" when our neighbors scandalize us or ridicule us for being conservative Christians?

Some time ago the two of us were working together on a very public and controversial issue to which we both felt called to respond as a matter of biblical principle. We were both featured in newspaper and television programs for taking a stand that was not politically correct. Within days, we stand receiving death threats against ourselves and, even worse against our children. Our property was vandalized in a way that was the trademark of one anti-Christian group. Envelopes started arriving, each containing a picture of a family—obviously meant to represent ours—with the eyes burned out. The message was dark and twisted—but very clear.

These were small matters, certainly, compared to the real persecution that has been suffered by Christians through the ages, but it gave us a little bit of a glimpse at the inside view of what persecution does, how it feels, and how we are to react. The first question we were forced to confront was this: Was it our message that was offensive, or were *we*, in our manner and delivery, the offense? This kind of introspection is always necessary. We must not let our mode of communication mar the eternal message we have to deliver. Mistreatment by others can create some beneficial times of meditation and reevaluation for us individually.

Second, we had to make sure that we did not respond in kind. The Bible is clear that a "soft answer turns away wrath" and that we are not to "overcome evil with evil." Instead, we are to overcome evil with good.

Third, we realized that there are occasions when the truest message, delivered in the most Christ-like way, will still reap anger and punishment from those who do not know his love. When persecution comes, as it will always come in a variety of rimes, places, and methods, it is very easy to adopt the "duck and cover" mentality. Yet survival is not the primary goal the Bible charts for us. We are not called to be merely "survivors," we are called to be "overcomers."

The ultimate message in Revelation is that God is triumphant and his love unyielding, and that we are to be overcomers in the midst of the worst situations. Remember, we are given the command to be overcomers in the context of the book of Revelation, which depicts the most egregious persecution the world has ever known. We are able to overcome because, as we are told in John's Gospel, Christ has overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil. We can overcome these formidable opponents not because of our strength, but because he lives in us.

Who are overcomers," and how do they "overcome" the fiery trials of persecution? The answer is clear, simple and infinitely powerful: "Whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. And who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1John 5:4-5).

We do not need some magical formula to become conquerors in the midst of earthly defeat. We need only call upon the power of Christ in us, the hope of future glory. The early apostles, who experienced a myriad of persecutions in their life and ministry, reminds us that persecution should not come as a surprise. In fact, for the mature believer, persecution is the norm:

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. (1 Peter 4:12-14.)