



The Christian

LIVING IN TODAY'S HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

“We die once. It might as well be for Christ.” Those are the words spoken by a Christian who a short time later would give his life for the cause of Christ. Throughout history we are told of people who died for their faith and belief. But those were not the words of Cyprian or Justin Martyr who died at the hands of the hate-filled Romans in the 300s. Those words were spoken in 2014 by missionary Werner Groenewald about a month before the Taliban brutally shot him, his five year old son and three year old daughter. How hostile can the world become?

Let's begin early in Scripture and begin to answer that question. Noah was ridiculed while building the ark. Joseph was imprisoned because he refused to sin. The Israelites were treated as slaves and their children were drowned in the Nile River. David lived in caves because the king wanted him dead. Elijah was on the run from an evil king and queen. Jeremiah was sentenced to a pit and left to die because he stood up for the Lord. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stepped into the fiery furnace for their faith. Daniel was sentenced to a horrible death because he prayed. Stephen was stoned until he died. The list goes on, right up to today. History is filled with hostility and persecution of God's people. We must begin to realize that persecution of God's people is the norm, not the exception.

THE WORLD HATES US

No one ever said life would be easy! When Jesus said that we would be living as lambs among wolves, he meant it. The Bible repeatedly tells us that living as God's children will bring with it hostility and hatred. In Matthew 5 we read, “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.” In John 15:18-22 Jesus talks about the open hostility to come. In just a few verses he mentions seven times that we will be hated, and here Jesus tells us why. “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, **you do not belong to the world**, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way **because of my name**, for they do not know the one who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now **they have no excuse for their sin.**”

We might wonder how this can be. Jesus healed people. He loved them and raised some from the dead. Jesus had compassion on everyone, even the lowliest in society. He fed people who were hungry, he loved little children and he taught about peace and love. Why are we, as followers of Jesus so hated? When look closely at John 15 we see three reasons that stand out. First, we “do not belong to the world.” We are different. Those who identify with the world are loved by the world. But we know that he chose us out of the world. Second, we bear Christ's name. Our churches bear that name. Our homes, families and lives also identify us as Christ's followers. And third, we expose the world's sin. Every time the Pharisees tried to lay a trap for Jesus, he turned it around and ultimately made them look bad. He exposed their hearts as sinful and destructive. Ephesians 5:11 says, “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.”

David Murray in his article “Why Are Christians Hated So Much?” writes, “Politicians, judges, journalists, producers, educators, and many others are sympathetic to, and tolerant of, every kind of false religion and every kind of perversity, except when it comes to Christian teaching and values. Then the sharpest knives are out.”

There has been open hostility toward Christ’s followers throughout history. Even today Christians are put to death for their beliefs. The world is saturated in sin, and as a result, it hates everyone who does not fall in line with its thinking. The world will never accept Christ’s followers. 1 John 3:13 says, “Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you.” Now, for the first time in our short history, America is regarded as a “post-Christian” country. How serious is this, and what can we do about it?

Cite incidents in Christ’s ministry that demonstrate how much he was hated.

What are some reasons unbelievers give to hate Christians? Are any of their reasons valid?

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Already in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount he warned of coming persecution toward his followers. In fact he went so far as to say that persecuting his followers would seem like a godly thing to do. In John 16 Jesus said, “The time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are 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 their time comes you will remember that I warned you about them.” (Consider that the apostle Paul, who in his younger years, thought that he was doing God’s work by persecuting Christians.)

The book of Acts shows this hostility began immediately after Pentecost. It gives several examples of persecution toward the early church. Chapter 4 begins with the arrest of Peter and John for preaching the gospel. They were commanded to stop evangelizing. In chapter 5 we read of the apostles being beaten. In Acts 7 Stephen was stoned by the angry crowd that included the soon-to-be apostle Paul. Following that brutal murder, Acts 8 begins with the words, “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” Chapter 12 continues the account of Christian persecution with King Herod arresting Peter and James. James was put to death, the first apostle to die, but Peter miraculously escaped. In Acts 26:9-11 Paul confesses his sin of hunting down Christians and even explains his methods, “I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.” After his conversion, Paul admits to Timothy, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Paul himself felt the sting of persecution throughout his ministry.

Because of such hostility, one might think that these persecutions would affect the number of people joining the cause of Christ. They did! The church grew rapidly. Whenever the apostles stood before their accusers, they used the opportunity to profess the good news of salvation. When Stephen, Peter and John stood before the Sanhedrin they used that moment as an opportunity to tell the story of God’s forgiveness through the Savior. Certainly they remembered the words of Jesus, “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say” (Luke 12:11,12.) And again we read in Matthew 10:18-20, “On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” What a lesson we can learn from them. Consider these probable sacrifices made by Christ’s apostles:

Andrew – Crucified

James Greater – Beheaded

Matthew – Speared to death

Simon – Crucified

Bartholomew – Beaten/crucified

John – Exiled/died of old age

Peter – Crucified upside down

Thomas – Speared to death

James Less – Stoned to death

Jude – Stoned to death

Philip – Crucified

Matthias – Stoned to Death

The persecution of Christ's followers continued from the early church through the middle ages and up to today. When writing of the Roman persecution of the Christians one author put it this way, "In those days execution was more or less the expected means of passing from this life to heaven."

Peter wrote that his persecution glorified God, and he considered it a privilege to suffer for the Lord. He wrote in 1 Peter 4:14-16, "If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name." From the days of the apostles, Christians have been persecuted and hated for their love of Jesus.

What are some ways we can show the world that we are proud to be Christians?

STILL TODAY

In Matthew 9:10-14 Jesus clearly tells us that persecution will continue until the end of time. "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."

Those words still are true today. Although the news media is not interested in these statistics, it is nevertheless happening at a rapid pace. David Barrett, noted statistician on this subject relates the following: Since the time of Jesus there have been an estimated 70 million Christians martyred.

The number of Christians systematically exterminated in Nazi Germany – 1 million.

The number of Orthodox Christians murdered in Russia between 1917 and 1950 - 15 million.

The number of Christians and foreigners killed in China's Boxer Rebellion - 200,000.

The number of Christians killed in communist China between 1950 and 1980 – 700,000.

The number of Catholics killed in Mexico from the late 1800s to 1930 - 107,000.

Opendoorsusa.org provides an annual list of the fifty most dangerous countries for Christians. Presently the top five are North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, and Pakistan. Also included on that list are Russia, Egypt, Turkey, India and Mexico. According to the *Aid to the Church in Need* organization, there are an estimated 150,000 Christians killed every year. That comes to seventeen Christians dying for Christ each hour of every day. An estimated 45 million Christians gave their lives in the last century, one million in the past ten years. We should remember the words of Hebrews 13:3, "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."

In the book "Prepare: Living Your Faith in an Increasing Hostile Culture" by J. Paul Nyquist, he states, "Get ready. An exciting, yet terrifying era is beginning for American believers. As cultural changes sweep our country, we'll soon be challenged to live out what the Bible says about confronting and responding to persecution. For nearly 250 years, Christians in America were able to live in relative freedom from persecution. We escaped because our society historically embraced and promoted biblical values. Our founding fathers penned a Constitution esteeming religious freedom and establishing that rights come from God, not the government."

Why is it that in many of our churches we hear so little about the persecution of Christians around the world, nor do we include them in our prayers? Do you agree or disagree that we should be more aware on these facts?

HOSTILITY AT HOME

The following comments are from “Lessons from the History of the Christian Church for Modern Christians” by Professor Em. James Korthals.

It’s been said that the U.S. is becoming a “secular country.” There is a clash between “man’s laws and God’s laws.” So, are Christians in America under attack? Compared to the violence against Christians in many places around the world, the answer is “no.”

What is happening in America is an increasing hostility and intolerance toward Christian beliefs and values. In current American culture, you are free to be a Christian as long as you don’t actually live out your faith, vote your faith, take a stand in relation to your faith, or believe others should embrace your faith. In other words, your faith can be privately engaging, but must remain socially irrelevant.

These philosophies have always been around but they reemerged strongly in the 1960s with a rejection of Christianity and a rebellion against traditional values. They became part of the ‘New Age’ and then in the 1990s were institutionalized. As a result people speak of the “politically correct” ways of thinking/doing things. Consider how the following have become common and are being strongly promoted today:

- **Rejection of the authority of the Bible.** *The Bible is undermined, ridiculed, criticized, adjusted, and rejected.*
- **Rejection of God’s authority.** *In a pluralistic society any god is OK! Man is god, people are gods, things are gods. Underlying this is a strong return to Gnostic philosophies (an attempt to harmonize reason and Scripture), paganism, and an aggressive rejection of the one true God. No longer is credence given to “I am the LORD your God You shall have no other gods before me.”*
- **Free sexuality.** *Heterosexuality and monogamy are consistently being undermined. This results in today’s acceptance of homosexuality, destruction of male/female and family roles, and free sex with no boundaries.*
- **Open spiritual experience.** *Whatever turns you on is OK! Seek spiritual enlightenment and experience from within and from beyond, and by whatever means you choose. The goal is paradise on earth, to be master of your own destiny and reach perfection in death. Sin and guilt are eliminated. These philosophies are now widespread. Many have been introduced into portions of the visible church and are affecting people’s attitudes toward the Bible and approaches to faith. More significantly they have become mainstream in society, becoming part of law or common practice.*

Give examples of how Christians are being silenced today.

POST-CHRISTIAN AMERICA

When America was established, nearly all of the founding fathers respected their Christian/Judeo roots and modeled the Constitution and Bill of Rights after those beliefs. Many of them wrote religious articles and openly professed their belief in God. Now, less than 250 years later, we have made an about face. Researches today declare that Generation Z (or iGen – born between 1995 and 2015) is the first post-Christian generation with nearly a third claiming they have no religion. A Barna poll reported that 13% of that generation consider themselves atheist compared to 6% of adults who consider themselves atheist. The generation of “nones” (those who have no religion) is growing at a rapid pace. The influence of Christianity is fading. Decades of dropping church attendance, Bible reading, and a breakdown of solid religious education within the home is taking its toll. Between 2000 and 2019 there was seen an average drop of religion among teens by 27%. Many of the poll respondents said they found religion “not too” or “not at all” important. Many don’t even think or talk about religion. When asked the reasons for their views, the top three answers were, “A benevolent God would not allow such suffering and evil”, “People who claim they are Christian are hypocrites”, and “With the advances in science, we can no longer reconcile the Bible to it.”

Due to advances in technology and social media, young people have instant access to all sorts of religious viewpoints that are dangerous for the Christian mind. Plus, many young people have little or no idea of any Bible stories or Bible heroes. They have never heard of Noah and Moses, David and Daniel. They are entirely biblically illiterate.

Where in our country does this anti-Christian trend seem to be the most serious? The 10 top post-Christian cities named in the Barna poll include two on the west coast and eight on the east coast with Springfield, Massachusetts topping the list. (Number eleven is Madison, Wisconsin.)

How can we stem this tide? It is quite probable that in our country the pendulum has swung too far already. The United States is no longer a Christian based country much less a Christian tolerant country. Instead it has become openly hostile to the ways of God. There is no doubt that future years will become increasingly more difficult for God's people to live the "Leave It to Beaver" lifestyle. Consider the great changes that have taken place in the past fifty years. What once were subtle hostilities toward the Christian are becoming more apparent. Many TV shows openly mock a godly lifestyle. Children's and adults' preoccupation with phones, electronic games, social media, sports, and computers, is slowly edging out church attendance, personal and family devotions, Bible reading and prayer. Technology has brought the world of sex a finger's click away. In the political arena we see a deliberate attempt to remove God from everywhere in society. One's Christianity has even become a litmus test for running for office.

But we must not give up hope. The promise that God will never leave us nor forsake us provides the strength we need to carry on. As Christ has commanded, we will continue to be salt and light. Although marked or targeted as different from the norm, we will always remember that we are strangers and foreigners here on earth. For our families, we must take up a new battle cry. In past years Christianity was an accepted part of the community and the Bible was passively accepted by society. Life was relatively easy for God's people. We must now understand that our children are living in a far more hostile world than the one in which we were raised. Now we must be far more intense in teaching our children and grandchildren why we believe what we do. This is called apologetics. Simply knowing Bible stories will not stand against the onslaught of society and higher education.

Has the removal of the Bible from public school classrooms made a difference in society? Explain.

What tactic did Paul use when he encountered people who were biblically illiterate? Read Acts 17:16-34.

It was said that the "pendulum has swung too far already." Agree? Disagree? Explain.

Discuss the importance of teaching children not only the "what" of Bible stories, but also the "why."

Generation Z is the first generation to be brought up entirely in the computer and social media age. How do you think this has brought about some of the church attendance problems today – especially in our young people?

Discuss apologetics according to 1 Peter 3:15: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

THE BLESSING OF PERSECUTION

What a comfort to know that the persecution Christ promised would come to his people isn't for naught. There is an end plan to it all. That plan is blessings! One might wonder how persecution can bring about blessings. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was explicit in telling the people, "Blessed are those who are

persecuted.” And again he says, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you.” After each of the verses from Matthew 5 Jesus explains what he means: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”, and “because great is your reward in heaven.” The joys that are today in the distant future will one day become a reality. And those joys are well worth the fight to get them.

After Jesus had taught his disciples the lesson of the difficulty of a rich man to enter heaven, he explained that his followers needed to surrender everything to follow him. Then Peter asked Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” That was a good question. What is in it for us? Just prior to reading a litany of faithful heroes in Hebrews 11, the writer sets the stage with a call to persevere in faith. Hebrews 10:32-37 says, “Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For, ‘In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.’”

God has plans for us—great and wonderful plans that include an eternity filled with blessings beyond our wildest dreams. 1 Corinthians 2:9 just touches on the matter, ““No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him” (NLT.)

Peter gives us confidence that no matter what may come upon us in the days to come, we need never fear for the Lord is with us in every battle. First Peter 3:14 assures us, “But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” We are assured that our perseverance and faithfulness to the Savior will result in a crown of victory. Then we will join with Paul in proclaiming, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7.)

How can we find comfort in the words of 1 Peter 5:8-11, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

As Christians, our lives will be filled with hatred by the world. Knowing that only the gospel can change lives, we and our families must strive to be even more zealous in sharing the message of Jesus Christ with all we meet. And while the sadness of the world’s hostilities fills our eyes with tears, we must continue to find comfort in the words of Paul in Romans 8:35-39, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Likewise we find joy and confidence in the words of Philippians 1:29, “It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.”

Is a future of possible persecution and rejection a reason for a Christian couple to decide not to have children?

With our country heading in a post-Christian direction, how might the church need to change some of its thinking and approach to outreach?