

End of Days Persecution

Welcome to Harvest Community Church

Series: Signs, Times and Seasons

Text: Matthew 24:9-10, Matthew 5:10

One of the cultural signs of the last days will be a growing call for **tolerance** all the while there will be a growing intolerance for the things of God, ways of God and people of God.

America was founded on decidedly Christian principles. The Declaration of Independence recognizes that God is the **source** of human rights and freedoms. ~ “*We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights*”. Christianity is declining in America because of the growing humanistic philosophy that has now taken the forefront in our society instead of our Biblical foundations. Biblical morality is at odds with the current prevailing secular ideas of the culture not only in America, but around the world.

When we think of the word persecution many equate it with the idea of **violence**. The truth is most persecution is not violence in the physical sense. It is a **squeeze** of Christians in five spheres of life: private, family, community, national, and church. Not everything bad that happens to us is persecution. Persecution is trouble that happens to us for **righteousness** sake.

Six stages to religious persecution:

- 1) **Stereotyping** Christians are often portrayed as ignorant, uneducated, inhibited, homophobic and intolerant. We are portrayed in the media as “holier than thou” or as hypocrites who do not live what they believe. Many times, we are portrayed as out of touch with the realities of society. True authentic Christianity is one of love, consistency, faith and struggle. Satan must discredit what God has deemed holy so people will accept his false interpretation of normal.
- 2) **Marginalizing** Secularists want Christianity to be displaced from the center of American life. They demand that church and religion only be allowed to exist in the realm of personal privacy. This is why they forbid public prayer, remove the mention of God and creation from education and Christian holidays are secularized. Today those who profess Christ and uphold Biblical values are deemed radical or insignificant and are to be excluded from politics, academia, entertainment and the media.
- 3) **Threatening** Persecution comes in the form of retribution for voicing, acting on or living out your Christian walk. Secularists want our Christianity to be private and quiet. Those who express their views on social media or discuss them in the business setting are in danger of losing their jobs. Many actors and news people have been blackballed as hacks and warned in no uncertain terms that if their views become known they will not work.

- 4) **Intimidation** Pressure to go along with the status quo or to face consequences in the form of social and personal loss of status and financial retribution.
In Huston, Pastors were encouraged to sign a petition to allow men and women to use one another's rest rooms. When they refused, five pastors were ordered to turn over their sermons, text messages and emails addressing homosexuality or gender issues. When they refused to comply, they were threatened with contempt of court and jail.
- 5) **Litigation** One of the newest ways to pressure Christians to go along and back down from our beliefs is the threat of being taken to court.
In Oregon, a bakery owned by a Christian couple who declined to bake a "wedding cake" for a lesbian couple were fined by the city for discrimination and sued by the couple for damages. The idea is to make the "cost" of living out your beliefs too high.
- 6) **Violence** The last step of persecution comes in the form of incarceration, torture and death. From the time of Jesus until now many people lost their lives or freedom simply for refusing to deny their stand for Christ.

In **Matthew 24:9-10** Jesus used five words that described the persecution Christians would face in the last days. They are --- Afflicted, Killed, Offended, Betrayed and Hated.

- **Afflicted** – A word that describes **pressure**, stress or stressful situations. It is a picture word that describes one who feels trapped and unable to move, with so much pressure upon them that they are barely able to breathe. It describes pressure that is very difficult to bear. For example, it refers to pressure from family, friends and even hostile reactions from fellow workers. It is event piled upon event to cause a weight so heavy that it feels like a crushing. It also depicts bullying, harassment and intimidation sometimes so much that it could lead to death. Early Christians experienced, harassment, arrest and even imprisonment for their faith. **Hebrews 12:4**
- **Killed** – A Greek word that means outright **slaughter**. It is interesting that many Christians are never told that they may one day die for their faith. For most, this would be a deal breaker and they would deny Christ in heartbeat. **Matthew 10:33**
Jesus told His disciples that many who followed Him would be killed and some would die horrible deaths. We know from history that this has occurred; from the Romans Colosseum, to beheading by Muslims, to being killed by tribes in Africa and in South America. The Bible tells us in last days many will become **martyrs** for the cause of Christ.
- **Offended** – A better translation of this word is **scandalized**. In the first century and in our day the prevailing culture teaches that there are no moral absolutes. Christianity teaches that Jesus is **Lord** overall. In the early church when paganism and a multitude of deities were worshiped to declare that attitude was considered unacceptable. Because people are offended by the beliefs that declare only One Way and a definite measure of right and wrong and Good and Evil, those offended seek to scandalize, demoralize and ostracize by branding Christians as intolerant, narrow minded, bigots who are closed minded and narrow-minded. The idea is of stigmatizing in such a negative light that people no longer take them seriously and have supposed reasons to treat Christians poorly.

- Betrayed – **Luke 21:16-17** Jesus warned that the persecution we face would come from within our own families. To be betrayed means to be handed over or delivered to authorities. There is nothing more hurtful than betrayal by the hands of those you have loved and trusted.
- Hated – The word hate, in the Greek carries with it the idea of utter disgust and repulsion, it is a much stronger word than dislike. One of the signs of the last days will be an utter hatred and intolerance in society towards Christians. In America this will be a complete turnaround from the way things were when Christians were trusted, respected and looked to for the moral high ground.

Because of this hatred, the Bible says we will be persecuted. **Luke 21:12** The word persecuted in the Greek carries with it the meaning of “one who vigorously pursues another”. This word is a hunting term. It is not something that is done accidentally or subconsciously. This could be translated “they shall hunt you”. Persecution occurs with a very deliberate plan in place and they have already decided what they will do with you when they catch you.

Jesus says they will lay hands on you and deliver you. This is a picture of being ill-treated and lead away as a prisoner who has already been condemned. It is a description of Christians being arrested, charged and treated guilty before they are even given a fair trial. In the court of public opinion and in some cases actual courts we will be determined guilty for standing firm on our faith and commitment to the Word of God. This implies that the government in the last days will have the power to inflict judgement and punishment on those who will not comply with emerging societal standards.

Jesus gave us instruction on how to view these situations. We are to see them as an opportunity to share our testimony. Remember we overcome the enemy by the Blood of the Lamb and the Word of our Testimony. **Luke 21:13-19, Revelation 12:11**

The Benefits of Persecution and Suffering.

- ❖ The Apostle Paul saw suffering as a gift. **Philippians 1:29**
- ❖ Suffering produces character. **Romans 5:3-4** The call to follow Christ is not the call to an easy life. Someone said- “God isn’t at work producing the circumstances I want. God is at work in bad circumstances to produce the me He wants”.
- ❖ Suffering causes us to learn to choose a life of courage. Courage reflects Christ’s character in difficult and trying circumstances. We must choose courage when we face cultural demands that conflict with Biblical standards. Peter and John found themselves in this situation when they were commanded to quit teaching Christ. **Acts 4:19-20**

- ❖ Suffering produces **Godliness**. A.W Tozer ~ “*To be right with God has often meant to be in trouble with men*”. **2 Timothy 3:12** If you are suffering as a Christians because you are a Christian, this is a sure sign that you are a child of God. Persecution gives us the opportunity to love our enemies and to do good to those who despitely use us. It truly causes us to love like Jesus does.
- ❖ Suffering produces **joy**. When they were imprisoned Paul and Silas chose worship over self-pity. **Acts 16:22-26**
- ❖ Suffering provides us with **rewards**. Too often we allow future rewards to be obscured by immediate gratification. The Bible is filled with encouragement about the blessings that wait for those who **endure** to the end.
 - They will be **avenged**. **Revelation 6:9-11: 16:5-7, 18:20, 19:2**
 - They will be given perfect and abundant lives, free from **sorrow**. **Revelation 7:14-17**
 - They will find eternal **rest**. **Revelation 14:13**
 - They will receive the **crown** of eternal life. **James 1:12**
 - They will have no more **fear** of death. **1 Cor. 15:54, Revelation 20:14**

The reason that Jesus included information about the persecution and suffering we would encounter in the last days is so that we could have an eternal **mindset** concerning what we will be facing. **Romans 8:18** He has never left us in the dark about what is coming, He has equipped us with the knowledge we need to live the overcoming life. We are being set up to not just survive the last days but to **thrive** in them, even in the midst of hardship and difficulty.

1 Thess. 3:2-4

In the last days we must be determined to **stand** firm in our faith even when being persecuted.

1 Peter 3:15-16

In the last days we must be determined to stand with each other and **encourage** one another.

Hebrews 10:24-25

In the last days we must be determined to draw security and strength from the Lord. We need not fear danger to our reputations, our jobs, finances or even our own **lives**.

Matthew 16:25