

In the year 304, Emperor Diocletian declared that he had destroyed the Christian church. Today over two billion people identify as Christians, and few people remember the emperor.

Over 200 years before Diocletian's Great Persecution, Peter wrote to the early church to prepare them for extraordinary persecution. He warned them that even though persecution was coming, they would benefit from it.

Over 365 million believers face intense persecution everyday in 2024, and I don't think it is a stretch to expect persecution to come on the Western Church soon.

How are we to prepare for and even respond to persecution?

In 1 Peter 4:12-19, Peter gives the church four instructions to follow in preparation for the persecution that is to come.

### **1: Expect Suffering (1 Peter 4:12)**

Throughout history, persecution has been normative for those who live for Jesus. In Genesis 3, God declared war on Satan, and as a result, Satan has been attacking those who worship the one true God.

Persecution is not a strange thing for believers; in fact, the absence of persecution should be strange. But when we do experience persecution, we must remember who our enemy is. The person persecuting us is not our enemy; our enemy is Satan and his demons. Jesus died for the persecuted *and* for the persecutor.

### **2: Rejoice in Suffering (1 Peter 4:13-14)**

Peter writes that we should rejoice when we are insulted for the name of Jesus.

Peter lists several privileges that come with persecution; these are reasons why we can rejoice in the midst of it.

#### **i: Our suffering is fellowship with Christ.**

As we read in Isaiah 53, Jesus came as the suffering servant; he is not removed from or unfamiliar with pain and suffering (see Philippians 1:29). God uses the refining fire for our good, and when we do suffer, Christ is with us in the fire. It is in those times of intense persecution that many Christians testify to the incredible nearness and fellowship with Jesus, and that is a reason to rejoice.

#### **ii: Our suffering means future glory.**

In our Western mindset, we tend to believe that suffering is to be avoided, and the absence of suffering is glorious. But for the Christian, hardship is the path to glory. God doesn't remove the suffering; He transforms it into something glorious (see John 16:20-22)

We see this displayed on the cross—the pain and agony that Jesus went through was changed into something glorious and powerful. There is always a purpose and a glorious outcome to the suffering we endure as a result of persecution. Sometimes we don't see the outcome in this life, but it is always glorious, and that is a reason to rejoice.

### **iii: Our suffering leads to the Holy Spirit's ministry (1 Peter 4:14)**

There are many testimonies of persecuted Christians who say things that no human would normally say, even while being put to death for the name of Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they are filled with courage and boldness (see Acts 7:55).

This has been the experience of many believers, boldly singing, and declaring the Gospel even while they are losing their lives in an excruciating way. This supernatural power is a reason to rejoice.

### **iv: Our suffering glorifies the name of Jesus (1 Peter 4:16)**

In our modern context, we lose the impact this verse would have had on the original readers. In the 1st century, being called a Christian was a term of ridicule, a slur. It is becoming increasingly more so today. Do you boldly bear the name of Jesus? Are you willing to suffer ridicule for claiming his name? This verse promises there is glory in bearing his name, and that is a reason to rejoice.

### **3: Let Suffering Refine You (1 Peter 4:17)**

When in the furnace of persecution, the frivolous things of this world melt away, and we see the reality of where we stand with regards to holiness. God uses persecution to refine the church. We saw a little glimpse of this during 2020. Many people left the church when the authorities told us we were not allowed to gather to worship. Sadly, there was a falling away, an exposing of the heart.

The persecution of the church is used as God's judgment to refine the Bride of Christ.

Every loving parent knows that shaping your child in the right direction involves times of discomfort. God the Father loves us enough to allow discomfort to come upon the church for our holiness, for our refining. If we don't experience some opposition, we should be concerned. If we proclaim the whole truth of God's Word, we will offend and experience opposition in this world.

### **4: Commit Suffering to God (1 Peter 4:19)**

When called upon to experience persecution, we can commit our souls to our Heavenly Father. That word "entrust" is a banking term meaning to deposit a treasure for safekeeping in a trusted place.

When you commit your life to the Lord, you can be absolutely certain that you have a guaranteed eternal inheritance. The great news is that you can continue to add to that deposit in heaven, storing up treasures for eternity.

Are you living today with eternity in mind? This is difficult because the present temporal world is so loud. We so easily get caught up in its trappings that we forget we are living for so much more than what we see around us.

*It has been said, "unsaved people have a present that is controlled by their past, but Christians have a present that is controlled by the future."*

Are you living with an eternal perspective?