

**THE
CHRISTIAN
AND
PERSECUTION**

Biblical Responses to Persecution

MODULE 3



Lesson Three

Biblical Responses to Persecution

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this lesson the students will be able to articulate a range of responses to persecution that are found in Scripture. They will be equipped to think beyond simplistic attitudes and reactions, and to engage with the complexity of issues that form a biblical response together with an understanding of the theological bases for human rights concern and activism. They will be equipped to counter common objections, articulated within some Christian circles, to involvement in human rights advocacy and challenged towards proactive engagement in promoting justice with compassion.

Preparatory Bible Reading: Acts 7:54-8:8

Lesson Outline:

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Lesson Three

Biblical Responses to Persecution

We see a range of valid responses to persecution in Scripture; the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and of the community of believers, is needed to discern which response is appropriate in each situation.

Introduction

It is clear from Scripture that for followers of Christ persecution on account of their allegiance to him can be regarded as normal and may be expected. Jesus was very direct about this, saying “If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). Similarly, Paul warns: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). The life of the church continues to reflect the life of Jesus in being characterised by periods of opposition and persecution.

It is not a surprise, therefore, that in many parts of the world today the church is a suffering church. As has been noted in the first module of this course (Religious Persecution – Historical and Global Perspectives), we must acknowledge that Christians suffer for a range of reasons, not all of which are related to their identity or witness as Christians. However, suffering on account of his Name (Acts 5:41) remains a daily reality for many Christian believers, including those within the Middle East and North Africa region.

We will focus on examples of responses that have a biblical precedent. We will look at instances of persecution throughout church history, to the present day,¹ and observe how these biblical responses to persecution have been applied at different times and in different situations.

1. Accepting and enduring persecution – even with joy?

The Christian who has surrendered all to Christ, overcoming fear by his power, can accept and endure persecution for his sake, in his strength.

a. Persecution - it's no surprise!

Reading: John 15:18-20

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.”

¹ Church in many parts of the world today (South America [Mexico, Peru, Colombia], Eastern Europe, Asia [Communist: China, Vietnam, Laos, North Korea; Islam: Central Asia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia; Hindu: Nepal, India; Buddhist: Myanmar, Sri Lanka], Africa [Nigeria, Somalia, Eritrea])

From this passage from John, we see that the source of persecution is the hatred the world bears for the Lord Jesus and towards those that he has chosen out of the world. When the Christian church is distinct from the world and clearly bears the image of Jesus, she becomes a target for the world's hate and aggression and she will be persecuted accordingly.

Persecution, while not of itself good, is therefore to be expected. It need hold no fear, for *"we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28). This "good" refers to the ultimate advantage of the believer in his or her resemblance to Jesus and destiny in God's plan of salvation rather than any notion of temporal comfort or prosperity.² In fact, the Bible often speaks of the blessing that accompanies persecution:

- *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:10)
- *Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing* (1 Peter 3:9)
- *But even if you would suffer for what is right, you are blessed* (1 Peter 3:14)

This blessing may be for the persecuted individual, the church or the society in general. Many examples throughout history show massive church growth during or after seasons of severe persecution:

- In 303, the Roman Emperor, Diocletian, issued the first of a series of edicts against Christians leading to a great persecution in which thousands of Christians were executed, often by burning alive. Despite the severity of the persecution, the church continued to grow and the faith of the Christians under this intense pressure was strengthened by the example of the martyrs – "As war brings out the heroic qualities of men, so did the persecutions develop the patience, the gentleness, the endurance of the Christians, and prove the world-conquering power of faith."³
- In 1970 there were an estimated 1.5 million Christians in China, but under the repressive regime of Chairman Mao and Chinese Communism, the number of professing Christians grew to 65 million by 1990.⁴
- Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran the church has faced severe restrictions and persecution, including the martyrdom of several church leaders and many imprisonments. However, church growth has been such that some estimate that the evangelical population has the highest growth rate in the world at 19.6%.⁵

The observation that church growth often follows violent persecution led Tertullian, a second-century Christian writer from Carthage in North Africa, to pen his famous verse to the persecutors of Christians:

"As often as you mow us down,
the more numerous do we become:

² See Module 2 Perspectives on Persecution – "What is our greatest good?"

³ http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/2_ch02.htm

⁴ *World Christian Encyclopedia* 2nd Edition, Oxford Univ. Press, 2001, vol. 1, p. 191.

⁵ *Operation World* 7th Edition by Jason Mandryk, Biblica Pub., 2010, p. 916.

The blood of the Christian is seed.
For who, when he sees our obstinacy
Is not stirred up to find its cause?
Who, when he has enquired,
Does not then join our Faith?⁶

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.⁷

b. Persecution and blessing

Persecution is not to be actively pursued, but God in His infinite wisdom both allows persecution to occur and uses it as a vehicle of blessing. Persecution may therefore be said to have the capacity to deepen one's faith and to unify, strengthen and purify the church and to cause it to grow.⁸

Persecution puts faith to the test, revealing the true depths of our commitment to Christ. It becomes an opportunity to grow in maturity and develop perseverance, as it is written in James 1:2-4:

² *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*

This maturity of faith is not just to the benefit of the individual believer, but enriches the church – local and global – as God uses persecution to accomplish His will. So we see, for example, that persecution was the motivation for the first believers to leave Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen and start spreading the Gospel (Acts 8:1-4).

It might even be asked if it is right to assist others through persecution. Could helping someone out of such a trial be denying them the opportunity of blessing, of spiritual growth? God certainly does work in our lives through affliction, pain and suffering, but these also provide the opportunity for others to demonstrate Christian love and support. Likewise, the persecuted church becomes the occasion for other churches to experience the blessing of ministering to Christ through compassion to his suffering church.

c. Enduring persecution

Many verses in the Bible speak about *enduring* hardship for the sake of Christ, for example Hebrews 12:7; "Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father?" (see also 2 Timothy 2:3, 4:5, 1Peter 2:20) The Greek word "υπομενο" (hipomeno), which is translated as "endure," denotes to remain or stay behind, when others have departed, to bear up under, endure or suffer patiently.⁹

⁶ Apology 50, quoted from: Daniel, Robin, *This Holy Seed*, 1992, Harpenden: Tamarisk Publications, dedication

⁷ Attributed to Tertullian, Workman, Herbert B., *Persecution in the Early Church*, 1906, London: William Clower & Sons, p. 352

⁸ Galli, Mark, "Sometimes Persecution Purifies, Unites and Growths the Church. Sometimes it doesn't", in: *Christianity Today*, May 19, 1997, Vol. 41, No. 6, p.16

⁹ <https://www.teknia.com/greek-dictionary/hypomeno>

The Lord Jesus is held up as an example to us of what it means to endure; “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame.”(Hebrews 12:2) And the Apostle Paul is also often described as enduring persecution: “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, suffering – what kind of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.” (2 Timothy 3:10-11). In fact, he even writes that he delighted in them for Christ’s sake: “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10)

Enduring suffering patiently does not condone the persecution or make it any less evil, but the Lord warns us to expect it and that by God’s grace we can rejoice in it. A Christian author and researcher put it nicely when he wrote: “I am not trying to paint a pretty mask on persecution, it is ugly, but the Bible teaches us to expect it and rejoice.”¹⁰ He also wrote: “God desires His people not to grudgingly accept sufferings, but rather to rejoice in them.”¹¹

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus speaks of the blessedness of believers when they are insulted, persecuted and falsely accused for the sake of Christ (Matthew 5:11). He tells such victims to “rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...” (Matthew 5:12). Clearly, the heavenly reward is to be the reason for rejoicing in persecution and while blessing might be seen on the earth following times of suffering and hardship, the main reward is yet to come in joyful anticipation.

Enduring persecution does not mean total compliance to the will of those causing the suffering. Our Lord Jesus refused to answer the questions set before him during his interrogation, first by the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:63), and later by Pontius Pilate (Matthew 27:14). Caiaphas, the high priest, eventually forced Jesus to confess that he is the Christ by charging him under oath by the living God, but Jesus refused to answer any of the charges brought against him before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, much to the latter’s amazement.

The Apostle Paul submitted to persecution in as far as he was in submission to Jesus Christ and so he identified himself as a **prisoner of Christ** when incarcerated for his sake (Ephesians 3:1). He endures hardship under the authority of Christ rather than as a passive victim of the local administration or even the Roman Empire. From this perspective, Paul can rejoice and even delight in persecution as he continues to serve the purposes of God in and perhaps through his imprisonment.

d. Persecution and martyrdom

Sometimes the persecution of believers will result in martyrdom although this is not to be wished for. Jesus himself went to the cross only when he knew “that the time was right” and that he was completing the work the Father had given him to do (John 17:4). At other times the people might have wanted to kill him, but Jesus then avoided

¹⁰ Harris, Zachary, “My Case against Secrecy in Mission” (online), February 2001, p. 4 (Available at: www.geocities.com/zacharyaustinharris/underground.htm)

¹¹ Harris, Zachary, “A Critique of ‘Security’”, (online), no date, p.2 (Available at: www.geocities.com/zacharyaustinharris/security.txt)

martyrdom; *“At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, **because his time had not yet come.**”* (John 7: 30).

Paul recognised that martyrdom would only come once his God-given task had been completed. When writing to the Philippians from prison, Paul pondered whether he would live or die (Philippians 1:20-26) and was convinced that the time for him to die had not yet come because his presence was still necessary for the Philippian church. Years later, when writing his second epistle to Timothy, Paul recognised that his ministry on earth was now finished and that the time had come to depart this life in martyrdom; *“For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”* (2Tim. 4:6-7).

Martyrdom generally causes a strong reaction in the Christian community. There is trauma for the family, friends and church and an atmosphere of fear may quickly develop. Individual faith is challenged. People who were attending church for more material reasons stop coming, but the faithful remain and their faith may be strengthened. Thus the church goes through a refining process. Usually, there is immediate support for the dependents of the martyrs, but unfortunately their needs and emotional pain can be forgotten by the wider church as time goes by.

Martyrs of the faith should be remembered and honoured, without being “sainted”. The church can make martyrs out to be “super Christians”, forgetting their weaknesses and struggles with sin common to us all and thus their example no longer applies to “normal Christians” within the church!

e. Persecution - its destructive power

Persecution, however, has also been observed to cause great damage to the church and hinder its growth. The Apostle Paul, understanding that times of trial were coming to churches, was careful to challenge the church to remain true to the faith so that believers would not be unsettled by the approaching hardship:

“So then we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.” (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

Notice that Paul acknowledged that persecution had the potential to destroy his hard work in Thessalonica. For Paul, it is important that Christians are prepared for persecution and they are expected to remain true to the faith. After establishing churches in Anatolia, Paul and Barnabas revisited the congregations with the specific aim of warning them against persecution and the need for them to remain faithful.

“They preached the good news in that city [Derbe] and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the

disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' they said.'" (Acts 14:21-22)

There have been historical cases of persecution where no apparent blessing has resulted. Of course, such things are difficult to judge from a human perspective and ultimately only God knows and sees the full picture. However, it is worth noting that persecution might be the cause of spiritual barrenness in certain parts of the world today. In North Africa, for example, there used to be a vibrant church in the early years of the Christian era. At the time of the Islamic conquest, there were 30-40 bishops serving Christian communities. By the year 1050, only 6 bishops remained - in 1400, there were none left.¹²

Similarly, there was a substantial Christian presence in the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the Islamic conquest, but after the reign of Caliph Umar (†644), they had either become Muslims or they had left the Peninsula.¹³

Also in East Asia, we see that persecution resulted in the wiping out of Christian communities. Nestorian missionaries had an effective work in China from 635 to the early 800's. Then, in 845 Emperor Wu Tsung started a fierce persecution against the native Christians. In the year 987 the Nestorian church sent six monks on a fact-finding mission to China to report on the state of the church. On their return they are quoted as saying: "There is not a single Christian left in China."¹⁴

It is estimated that there were approximately 500,000 Christians in Japan at the beginning of the 17th century, but in 1614 the first Japanese Shogun, Iyeyasu, issued the Great Edict of Annihilation against the Christian church. By 1650, most Christians had either committed apostasy, fled the country or had been martyred.¹⁵

In the light of such examples, Dr Workman, a notable author on persecution and church martyrs, has written; "Persecution may be a sign of strength. It is hardly a cause of strength when it is cruel and persistent. Persecution may kill a religion and destroy it utterly, if that religion's strength lies only in its numbers, by a simple process of exhaustion. The opinion that no belief, no moral conviction can be eradicated from a country by persecution is a grave fallacy."¹⁶

A Western missionary operating in North Africa under the name of 'Ted Fisher' saw persecution by state authorities as a reason why Christian work in North Africa was sometimes perceived as being 'barren'; "[...] Popular belief at home has it that they (missionaries in North Africa) served for years without any fruit. The reality is that many did see fruit, but much of it was cut down too early by persecution. [...] That is exactly what happened here. There was a thriving group of believers until it was scattered by cruel police persecution less than 20 years ago. Some of these believers are still here, keeping their faith, but keeping it to themselves. Persecution *without support* has

¹² Galli opus cit., see also Daniel opus cit.

¹³ Scudder, Lewis R. III, *The Arabian Mission's Story*, 1998, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, p.57-62

¹⁴ Galli opus cit.

¹⁵ Laman, Gordon D., "Our Nagasaki Legacy: an Examination of the Period of Persecution of Christianity and its Impact on Subsequent Christian Mission in Japan:", *The Northeast Asia Journal of Theology*, March-September 1982, p.94-141

¹⁶ Workman opus cit., p. 350

scarred them and they are unwilling to take the risk of starting a church again.”[Italics added]¹⁷

In areas of the world where Christians have seen most persecution, the lack of concern shown by the worldwide church has been a matter of criticism. ‘Ted Fisher’ recognises that support could have made a difference to the persecuted North African Christians. This thought is echoed by Dr Vernon Sterk: “As a missionary who has been involved in evangelism, discipleship and Bible translation for about thirty years in an environment hostile to the gospel, the limited involvement of the worldwide church in supporting and encouraging persecuted Christians has been frustrating.”

Dr Sterk, who studied the persecuted church in Chiapas, Mexico, came to doubt the validity of Tertullian’s well-known statement - “The blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the church” and saw complications arising from the general assumption that persecution is, of itself, a positive element in causing the growth of the church. Based on his studies and experience, he concluded that acceptance of the gospel message leads to persecution which negatively affects the growth of the church, **but** “*the damaging effect can be minimized through an adequate preparation for and proper response to persecution.*”[Italics added]¹⁸

What are the damaging effects of persecution? The intimidation experienced by Christians often creates an atmosphere of fear and distrust. This distrust is not restricted to outsiders, but may also be directed towards family members and those within the Christian community. This results in strong feelings of insecurity. There is often a “neutralization” of the believers’ faith as they keep their faith to themselves and avoid being known as Christian, refraining from meeting with other believers and being publically accepted as belonging to the majority religion. Inevitably, the pressure causes some to deny faith in Jesus Christ and many to consider life in another country where Christianity is accepted and persecution for the sake of Christ less likely. In the Middle East, for example, persecution and economic pressure, whether individually or collectively, have resulted in the migration of many Christians, weakening the church that remains.

f. Persecution - the response of the worldwide church

The worldwide church can support the suffering church in a number of ways. First, the church can stand with those being persecuted in prayer, for example, the church in Jerusalem was earnestly praying for Peter while he was in prison (Acts 12:5). In order to pray effectively, the church can also seek to be better informed about the situation. Although some secrecy is often maintained to protect the persecuted and their families, much information is freely available through the media. Appreciating the suffering and faith of the persecuted strengthens the church.

In Colossians 4:10-11, Paul commends Aristarchus, Mark and Justus for being a source of comfort in prison. The church can encourage and comfort the persecuted. Many have commented on the loneliness they have felt during times of imprisonment or hard

¹⁷ Fisher, Ted (pseudonym), “Planting a Church from Nothing”, in: Frontline, April 2002, p.2

¹⁸ Sterk, Vernon J., Does your Church have a Responsibility to the Persecuted Church?, unpublished. See also: Sterk, Vernon Jay, The Dynamics of Persecution, 1992 (Ph.D. Dissertation at Fuller Theological Seminary).

treatment for the sake of Christ, and the reassurance they have felt to know that others care. This practical help may extend to the dependents of victims who might otherwise be forgotten.

Believers, then, can help the persecuted as they endure persecution (Section I), but they can also provide assistance when the response involves fleeing and relocation (Section II) or resisting the persecution, for example through legal challenge (Section III).

Discussion Questions

- a- The Bible repeatedly associates persecution with blessing. In what ways might this blessing be experienced: I) as an individual persecuted believer, II) as the local church, III) as the global church, IV) as society in general?
- b- In Ephesians 3:1 Paul identifies himself as a prisoner of Christ. How do you think this attitude could help Paul endure persecution and rejoice in his suffering?
- c- The author writes, “However, persecution has also been observed to cause great damage to the church and hinder its growth.” How do you think damage to the church during times of persecution might be minimised?

2. Escape routes – fleeing from persecution

Biblical examples of escaping from persecution include Jesus and Paul. This can be a valid option today – not motivated by a concern for personal safety, but by a desire to further the work of God’s kingdom, under his direction. Rather than asylum, temporary and local relocation options are usually the most effective.

a. A biblical mandate to flee from persecution

Flight from persecution is a valid response from scripture. The Lord Jesus warned his listeners about approaching danger (Matthew 24:15,16) and said; “*let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.*” The Christians of Jerusalem, remembering the Lord’s admonition, forsook the doomed city in good time and fled to the town of Pella in the Decapolis, beyond the Jordan, in the north of Peraea, where King Herod Agrippa II, before whom Paul once stood, opened to them a safe asylum.¹⁹

Our Lord Jesus himself strategically withdrew from danger on a number of occasions, starting from the attempt of King Herod to kill him as a baby:

- Matthew 2:13 *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”*

¹⁹ Schaff, Philip (1819-1893), History of the Christian Church, Volume 1: Apostolic Christianity A.D. 1-100

- Matthew 12:14-15: *But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick.*
- John 8:59: *At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.*
- John 10:39: *Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.*

The Apostle Paul also followed this strategy on a number of occasions. For example, when he was threatened to be killed by the Jews in Damascus and they were carefully watching the city gates to make sure he did not escape, Paul managed to get away in a basket lowered through an opening in the city wall (Acts 9:23-25).

Later in Jerusalem, Paul talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him and when the brothers learned of this they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus (Acts 9:29-30). In fact, Paul's steadfast witness and service to the gospel was a threat not only to himself, but also to those around him and so, bearing the safety of others in mind, Paul often left quietly to avoid bringing them into danger because of him. In Acts 17, for example, we read of the brothers in Thessalonica sending Paul and Silas on to Berea when the Jews there stirred up trouble and then later, when the Jews from Thessalonica arrived in Berea too and agitated the crowds, Paul was sent on his way to Athens (Acts 17:1-15).

In Matthew 10:17-23 Jesus foretold the persecution and hardships that his disciples would encounter whilst preaching in the towns and villages of Israel and he instructed his disciples to escape persecution when possible; *"When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes."* (Matthew 10:23)

It is important to notice that the motivation for flight was not simply for the sake of personal comfort and to avoid danger, but gave the opportunity to continue ministry and further the Kingdom of God. Thus, for example, the Apostle Paul escaped from the governor of Damascus in a basket lowered from the city wall (2 Corinthians 11:32,33), but his escape enabled him to serve Jesus Christ in preaching the gospel to the gentiles in many other places.

b. Fleeing persecution - not always the best option

In times of persecution it is important that a local witness be maintained even though others flee. After the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7), a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem and many fled and preached the gospel as they scattered (Acts 8:4), but the apostles remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). The Bible account seems to acknowledge that those that escaped did well as they used the opportunity to preach the gospel to other nations and those who remained and bore the persecution did well to stay and maintain the church in Jerusalem. When the response to persecution is out of the motive to serve Jesus and honour him, who can judge those who choose to remain or those who choose to leave?

In our present era many Christians from the Middle East and North Africa think about leaving for a new life in the West. Often the motivation behind this relocation is not due to direct pressures or persecution, but more frequently it is because of perceived

economic benefits of emigrating, or because of wider security issues. This is understandable and is not just restricted to the Christian communities. Of course, economic reasons for emigration can sometimes be related to faith-based pressures if religious discrimination has led to reduced economic opportunity.²⁰ But it is important that the underlying reasons for leaving are understood and acknowledged, and that claims of religious persecution are not made when that is not the principal reason for leaving.

Whatever the motivation for leaving, it must be recognised that the emigration of Christians leaves the local church weaker and numerically disadvantaged, and this discourages those that remain. Those who consider fleeing persecution need to prayerfully seek the Lord's wisdom and direction in this matter and honestly recognise the motives underlying their desire to relocate, and the implications for the local church.

There is often a tension for the local church as the leaders seek to protect and provide places of safety for believers who are vulnerable or who are persecuted and yet they also seek to maintain the witness of the local church. It requires wisdom and prayerful insight to know when relocation is the best option for both the believer and the local Christian community.

Christian organisations that assist persecuted believers are increasingly becoming aware of this tension too. They recognise that, as outside organisations, they have sometimes been too quick to facilitate the relocation of those facing persecution. They acknowledge the importance of working closely with the leaders of local churches in this area, seeking to ensure that well-intentioned support to an individual believer does not unnecessarily undermine the witness of the church and the morale of the wider Christian community.

c. A shared commitment to sensitive support

The Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) is an initiative that involves many organisations, around the world, that assist persecuted believers. In 2013 the RLP endorsed a policy and commitment on the relocation of believers as a response to persecution. The full text of this policy and commitment, together with the accompanying background and rationale, are in the extra reading material for this Module. Their agreed policy is to only assist believers to relocate as a last resort, and the commitment is to work closely with local church leaders. The endorsement of this policy and commitment was prompted by the concern to approach the relocation of persecuted Christians (specifically from the MENA region) in a sensitive way, regarding the personal safety of the believer, the complex problems associated with relocation and the maintenance of the witness of the local church.

The commitment by these organisations to liaise closely with local church leaders implies the need for a corresponding commitment by local church leaders to continue to engage cooperatively with outside organisations to help them understand and respond appropriately to situations of persecution.

²⁰ http://www.catholic.org/international/international_story.php?id=54102

To summarize, fleeing from persecution has a biblical precedent as a right response to persecution, but it is not the only response and may not be appropriate for the sake of the local Christian community or the ultimate good of the persecuted Christian. When considering relocation as an option, much discernment is necessary in view of the complexity of consequences to the individual, their family, church and the communities they leave or enter. A whole range of issues needs to be carefully examined, including the motives, logistical factors, legal considerations etc. If relocation is decided upon, an in-country or in-region option is much preferable to permanent relocation to the West. However, in certain cases, relocation as an asylum seeker or refugee may be the only realistic alternative.

Discussion Questions

- a- Prepare a list comparing the positive and negative consequences of fleeing persecution. Divide a page in two with advantages one side and disadvantages the other.
- b- The Apostle Paul endured much persecution and hardship for the sake of Jesus Christ and the Gospel (2 Corinthians 11:21-33), but in Acts we read of several examples where Paul chose to flee or leave a city rather than stay and be persecuted. Choose one example and give your reasoning why Paul responded by fleeing in that instance.
- c- Imagine the case of a believer from a Muslim background in the MENA region. He or she is threatened by their family because of their faith. In which possible contexts would you advise them to:
 - Remain, at the risk of enduring persecution?
 - Relocate within the country?
 - Emigrate?

3. Resisting and challenging persecution, for example by claiming our rights

Using public opinion or appealing to legal rights can be a valid response to certain types of persecution. Claiming our rights can be a powerful testimony, and can lead to greater protection for other believers – though the opposite can also apply - so great wisdom is needed.

a. Appealing to public opinion

In the Bible we read of a number of situations where public sentiment has prevented persecution from taking place. In the case of Jesus, there were several times when the Jews sought to arrest him, but were afraid of the effect this would have on the crowds (e.g. Matthew 21:46) and therefore did not put their plan into action. It is notable that when Jesus was eventually betrayed by Judas, Judas watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to the Sanhedrin when no crowd was present so that he could avoid the risk of public opposition (Luke 22:6).

Fear of public outrage also protected John the Baptist for a time. King Herod had imprisoned him for criticizing Herod's relationship with his brother's wife and although

Herod would have liked to kill John, “*he feared the crowd, because they regarded John as a prophet*” (Matthew 14:5).

At the time of the persecution under the Roman emperor Diocletian, it was reported that public sympathy for the Christians saved many lives.²¹

Although we lack biblical examples of God's people actively appealing to public sentiment in order to avoid persecution, we can see how the strength of public awareness and opinion deterred opposition. In our day too, public opinion can be a helpful force against persecution (just as it is often a key factor in encouraging persecution!). Concern for persecuted Christians is therefore an appropriate motive for other believers to seek to encourage positive public sentiment towards Christians, for example by highlighting the vital contributions Christians make within society, or by speaking out about the injustices and discrimination they face.

Public and social media can be effective tools for raising awareness of injustices faced by Christians and for enhancing public attitudes which may in turn protect against persecution. However, in practice there are also many inherent risks. The media typically have their own agenda and can place a higher priority on sensation than the truth. This can lead to misinformation and even motivate the persecutors to act further instead of helping the persecuted. Information made public might be used by lawyers for the prosecution to build their case or arouse even greater enmity against the victim.

Applying to the media and seeking to engender public support, then, requires wisdom, spiritual insight and great caution as the potential is there for great harm as well as for great good.

b. Appealing to the law

In contrast to appealing to public sentiment, appealing to the law has a strong biblical precedent. This is to be expected as God is a God of justice and He blessed His people through giving them His law. It was expected that under God's law, members of society, even the widow, the orphan, the eunuch, the slave and the foreigner, would all have rights. When one compares the general lack of legal rights for people in other lands of that time, no wonder that Psalm 119 is a celebration of God's law!

In the early Christian era, most Christians lived under Roman rule and Roman law, which allowed well-protected legal rights for anyone who was a Roman citizen, but did not recognise many rights for non-citizens. Paul had been born in Tarsus to Jewish parents with Roman citizenship, an advantage that was counted a great privilege by the Roman commander in Jerusalem (Acts 22:27-29). In fact, his Roman birth right allowed Paul to escape being flogged at the hands of the Romans in Jerusalem. (Acts 22:22-26)

However, Paul did not always use his right as a Roman citizen. Paul and his companions (Silas, Timothy, Luke and perhaps others) were in the Roman colony of Philippi and a crowd attacked Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place to face the authorities (Acts 16:19). Paul and Silas were severely flogged and thrown into prison. They did not declare their Roman citizenship, which would have prevented them from

²¹ H.A. Drake, *Lambs into Lions*, 149–53; Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 598–601

receiving this harsh treatment, perhaps because they wished to protect their companions who did not have citizenship – the Bible does not give an explicit reason. Later, however, Paul and Silas affirmed that they were Roman citizens and as such had been unfairly treated. They demanded that the magistrates escort them out of prison, which they duly did, fearful of the repercussions of mishandling Roman citizens. We see, therefore, that Paul and Silas used their right as Roman citizens, and perhaps in doing so they affirmed their witness before the recently converted jailer and his family. But they had not demanded their rights for the sake of personal safety at the expense of their companions.

Later, Paul was the subject of a conspiracy of the Jews to kill him, but he used his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar and thus escape their plot. Paul, speaking before the Roman governor, Festus, and the chief priests and Jewish leaders, made his appeal: *"If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"* After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: *"You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"* (Acts 25:11-12)

In exploiting his rights as a Roman citizen, Paul endured a long process involving detention, a shipwreck off Malta and finally judgement in Rome, but at least he was able to continue with his ministry of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, even under house arrest.

Just as in the first century there were rights pertaining to Roman citizens from which Paul was able to benefit, so today the citizens of MENA countries, including Christian believers, have rights which should be afforded them, at least in principle. The specific rights will vary from country to country. Some rights will be established within national laws, and others may be derived from international laws which the country has endorsed. The rights may be specifically about religious freedom – for example, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which most countries in the MENA region have ratified, upholds the right to adopt beliefs of one's choice and to manifest those beliefs.²² Or the rights may relate to due judicial processes – for example, the constitutions and laws of most countries in the MENA region clearly state the rights a citizen has if facing arrest, legal proceedings and detention.

Even though these commitments are not always respected and rights may be violated, it can still be appropriate for a believer to claim his or her legal rights when facing persecution.

Claiming their legal rights as citizens of a particular country can be important not just for persecuted Christians themselves, but also for the wider benefit of other believers. If the challenge of injustice leads to that injustice being addressed, that can provide an important precedent for the protection of other believers. Persecutors cannot easily continue to act if their actions are shown to be outside the law of the land.

But the motivation for claiming our rights as believers is important, and it is important too to have a realistic understanding of what the process might involve. Like Paul, we

²² For more information regarding international law provisions relating to freedom of religion, see Module 6 of this course.

may choose to claim our rights if this will facilitate our continued witness or ministry and create a beneficial precedent for others. But like Paul, we may need to endure a lengthy and stressful process, which needs to be taken into account.

For Christians to be able to respond to persecution by appealing for their legal rights to be upheld, they need to be aware of what their legal rights are, and aware of the appropriate mechanisms for claiming those rights. Sometimes it is possible to identify local lawyers who may be sympathetic to believers, for example because they are believers themselves or have a strong commitment to human rights. Such lawyers may be willing and able to advise and act on behalf of local believers.

Any challenge should first be made through the local legal system, as far as that is possible. If local challenge fails or is not possible, then international advocacy may be possible for believers who are persecuted for their faith by state authorities.

c. International advocacy

Another approach can be to mobilise advocacy from within the international community. This involves approaches being made, almost always discreetly, to those who are able to use their influence to call for justice. There is biblical precedent for intervention by those with influence. In Acts 5:17-41 we read about the apostles facing persecution. They were put in the public prison and threatened not to teach in the name of Jesus. When the apostles refused to comply, the members of the Sanhedrin were furious and wanted to put the apostles to death, but they were saved by the speech of a leading Pharisee, Gamaliel, who advocated on behalf of the apostles and secured their freedom. His political influence put a stop to the persecution.

Politicians or other men or women of standing can use their influence to advocate on behalf of persecuted Christians. If this intervention is done discreetly, it avoids any negative result from public pressure. This is particularly important in the MENA region where public opinion is often strongly against Christians and Christian activity. Discreet advocacy can help address discrimination or persecution against Christians without the politicians involved fearing loss of public support.

An example of the effectiveness of discreet advocacy occurred in 2013 in Libya. A number of Egyptian and Western Christians were arrested and some were mistreated in detention. Threats were made that a trial before a military tribunal was imminent and one Egyptian Christian died in custody. Human Rights Organisations made discreet representations to politicians in North America, Europe, Latin America, and within United Nations institutions, presenting evidence of the injustices carried out by Libyan officials in contravention of the commitments Libya had agreed to respecting religious rights. These politicians engaged with the Libyan authorities to raise concerns about this issue and to request that it be addressed. The Libyan authorities acceded and facilitated the release of the detainees, allowing them to return home.

To summarize, we see examples in the Bible of public sentiment restraining those who sought to persecute, but exploiting public opinion to deter persecution can be detrimental and the possible consequences must be carefully and prayerfully considered. The Apostle Paul sets an example of someone using their legal right to avoid persecution, but he did not always choose to assert his right as a Roman citizen.

On certain occasions, he chose rather to endure persecution for the sake of the Gospel. A person of authority may use their influence to advocate on behalf of the persecuted in order to redress the violation of national laws or international agreements.

Discussion Questions

- a- A journalist for a local newspaper wants to interview the wife of a man who is in prison because of his ministry as a Christian pastor. I) Discuss the wisdom of agreeing to the interview and the possible consequences once the interview is published. II) If the wife agrees to the interview, what things should she emphasise and what should she avoid mentioning?
- b- The Apostle Paul sometimes refrained from claiming his rights as a Roman citizen. Under what circumstances do **you** think it would be best to refrain from claiming **your** rights when faced by persecution?
- c- To what extent do you think the pastor or elders of a local church can make preparations to face persecution? Imagine a recently appointed church leader in the MENA region who has reason to expect the possibility of persecution. What precautions can they take?

Conclusion

The Bible explicitly warns the church that there will be opposition in the form of persecution, but there is no one way to respond to that persecution. Instead, the Bible presents examples of the Lord Jesus, the apostles and the church responding to violent opposition in a variety of forms depending upon the situation. Guidance towards the appropriate response, whether from the persecuted individual or from the Christian community, must be sought from the Lord. Determining the correct response to persecution inevitably involves prayer, but shared experience and wisdom are a fundamental part of the guiding process.

Christian witness is often at its most powerful during times of testing through persecution. The appropriate response has the potential to glorify God and proclaim the truth of the Gospel, but a reaction to persecution that is based on fear and not faith results in disobedience and a denial of Christ and the Gospel, dishonours the Lord and discredits the work of the cross. The Bible warns against faithless response.

Irrespective of the type of response demonstrated in the face of persecution, the wider Christian community has a mandate to share in the pain and support that part of the body which is suffering (1 Corinthians 12:25,26). The church can help steer the persecuted believer through the storms of persecution and be a part of the discipleship process as God works all things to the good – the persecuted Christian's eternal prosperity and God's eternal glory.

Case Study/Learning Activity

Responding to Persecution

1. Background

H. works as a machine operator on building sites. He is married with two sons and both his and his wife's families live nearby in a small city with a population of about 70,000. His family background is Muslim and most family members are sincere in following Islam without being extreme. H. and his immediate family live in an apartment belonging to his father and H. works closely with his brother who contracts most of the business on construction sites.

One day at work, people stopped for tea and the conversation turned to talking about the Injil. Someone mentioned that there was an advertisement in a newspaper offering free Injils to whoever wanted one. H. wrote off and soon received a New Testament which he read. When foreign Christian workers visited him, he quickly accepted the Lord Jesus as his Saviour and a year later was baptised.

Although H. was always very careful and quite timid about his faith in Jesus Christ, gossip started to be heard that H. had turned away from Islam and rejected the religion of his country. This was probably the main reason for the persecution he later experienced, rather than his acceptance of Christ.

Question: *Before reading further, try to anticipate where persecution came from and what might have been the deeper reasons behind it. Make a list and see if you have found the actual three major sources in H.'s case.*

2. Persecution

Persecution for his new-found faith came primarily from three sources: society, his father and elder brother and the secret police.

Since H. became known as an apostate from Islam, he found that work opportunities were slowly drying up. Some contactors refused to give him work as they were horrified at what they saw as his rejection of Islam and Islamic values, but it appeared that most contractors were not willing to give him work out of fear that their business might suffer by association with H. Inevitably, H. began to suffer economically and he started to explore employment alternatives in other cities.

Meanwhile, H.'s father and elder brother felt an acute sense of shame as a result of his decision. They attempted to coerce H. to return to Islam through a combination of emotional manipulation, threats about loss of home and work if he continued to be a Christian and promises of reward if he turned back. Since the family bond was quite strong, H. found all this hard to bear.

The secret police arrested H. and detained him. They quickly broke his reserve as H. had been quite unprepared for this event. They intimidated him by showing that he had been under surveillance for several weeks, giving details of his movements and conversations (almost certainly obtained from his mobile phone records), they

threatened that harm would come to his children if he continued to be a Christian and attend Church and then they asked him to supply information about the other Christians in that city.

Questions: *If you were H., what would your options be at this point? What could have helped H. through this time of emotional and economic suffering? If you were H.'s pastor, what would you have advised him to do?*

3. Response and Reasons

H. determined that the safest course of action for both his family and the local church's sake was to leave the city and find work in another country nearby. On his own initiative, though he informed the church, H. went ahead and relocated. The local church supported him in this move by caring for his family in his absence and providing contact details of the Christian community in the other country as well as making introductions. The pastor also visited him and kept in prayerful contact.

Once H. had secured work and was able to rent a flat, he brought his family to join him. At one point, his past history with the secret police caught up with him and a nationalistic newspaper attacked him in print (information had been passed to the newspaper by official sources). This time, H.'s response was to appeal to governmental bodies and his embassy, and stress his right to the freedom of religion. He gained confidence through standing up for his rights and, in combination with other factors; the slanderous articles stopped being printed.

After this most recent case of being persecuted for being a Christian, H. desired the freedom of a western society. He looked into applying for asylum with the UNHCR, but he was told that there were unlikely to be sufficient grounds for him to be accepted. He then considered entering a European country illegally for a more peaceful and more secure life for his family. His former pastor and his present church were united in dissuading him from this move and H. chose to listen and refrained from pursuing this course of action.

Question: *What arguments do you think the pastor could have used to guide H. in his decision not to enter another country illegally?*

H. is presently back in his home country. He still thinks about a life where he can be a Christian without facing discrimination. He is fondly remembered by the church in the country where he went to work and he left a powerful testimony as a believer who sought to balance his responsibility to care and provide for his family with a prayerful concern for doing things according to God's will and responding to trouble in a godly way.

Additional Reading

Religious Liberty Partnership: (a) Relocation as a Response to Persecution: Policy and Commitment (2013), (b) Paper on Relocation by the Working Group on Support for Believers from Muslim Backgrounds (2010).

Lesson Three Test

1. What are the three basic types of biblical responses to persecution? Give one example from the Bible for each.
2. In your opinion, what two common attitudes or virtues should remain at the core of the responses to persecution, so each would safeguard its optimal effectiveness? Explain.
3. Jesus and Paul suggest that persecution can be endured with joy. From your personal experience of discrimination and persecution, what motivated you to endure and persevere with strength and effective witness? Describe the situation.
4. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Explain the meaning of this quote, and discuss to what extent it can be generalized in the life of the church.
5. Explain how persecution can bring destruction to the church in a given location, and illustrate with one example from history.
6. Can well-intentioned support of the worldwide church turn inadvertently damaging to the persecuted local community of believers? Illustrate from your ministry context, while suggesting actions from the outside church that would rather help uphold the witness of your church.
7. In most cases, what was the nature of the danger that Jesus and Paul had encountered before considering fleeing away to other locations? Give three examples from the New Testament to illustrate? Conclude.
8. In your opinion, how would fleeing to non-evangelized regions and communities differ from relocating to areas of established and flourishing Christian church?
9. Can the fact of having family and children influence the nature of the decision taken under persecution? Explain.
10. Summarize in a brief paragraph the main elements of the commitment mentioned in the extra reading that is made by the Religious Liberty Partnership, in helping the persecuted with their relocation needs.
11. List five of the rationales behind the policy and commitment made by the Religious Liberty Partnership.
12. How important is it for believers to know that persons in authority are uniquely sensitive to public opinion? Discuss the pros and cons of such a reality in relation to the effectiveness of church witness and persecution risks. Use biblical and contemporary examples.
13. In the Middle East and North Africa, sometimes leaning on the law can prove self-deceptive due to pervasive corruption. In your opinion, how can one avoid such pitfalls while still able to claim stated rights effectively?
14. In the context of your personal ministry or community, in what ways could appealing to international advocacy help improve the conditions for witness and service? Give concrete examples.
15. How can the state of secular international affairs influence the level of persecution in a given country? Discuss some possible appropriate responses from believers.

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