

**THE
CHRISTIAN
AND
PERSECUTION**

Biblical Principles
for Standing Strong

MODULE 4



Lesson Four

Biblical Principles for Standing Strong

Learning Objective:

By the end of the lesson the student will understand why persecution is normal in the Christian life and will be able to discern the spiritual issues behind events of persecution. The student will be equipped with biblical promises that will help him or her endure persecution.

Preparatory Bible Reading: (a) John 15:1-16:4, (b) Ephesians 2:1-4, (c) 1 Peter 5:6-11. Make a summary (maximum five sentences) of each of these readings.

Lesson Outline:

1. Introduction
 - a. Understanding worldview
 - b. The promise of persecution
2. Understanding four reasons for attack
 - a. Our connection with Jesus
 - b. Our testimony about Jesus
 - c. The exposing light of Jesus
 - d. The integrity of our witness for Jesus
3. Knowing your enemy
 - a. The World and its ruler
 - b. Countering the enemy's tactics
4. Knowing your identity
5. Conclusion

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Lesson Four

Biblical Principles for Standing Strong

God does not promise to spare his people from persecution – rather, we are told to expect it. However, God equips his people, strengthening them to stand firm when persecution comes.

1. Introduction

a. Understanding worldview

Our 'worldview' is an important factor in how we read and understand the Bible. Our worldview is how we see and understand this world. It is built on the values and convictions of our culture, upbringing, and life experience. How our surrounding culture thinks about suffering and persecution will strongly influence what we pick up from Scripture on this subject.

Consider an example. Christian writers, especially in the West, have produced a huge volume of literature on the question of why bad things happen to good people. Behind this question rumbles a whole complex of ideas from which the worldview arises that life should be good. Building blocks of this view are the ideas that all suffering is bad (is it?), that God has ultimate power and can do what He wants (can he?), that God is under the obligation to prevent bad things occurring (is He?). Another building block of this view is the idea that humans are inherently "good and innocent" people (but compare this with Romans 3:21), and the idea that life should be fair. Fairness means that good things happen to those who do good and bad things happen to those who do bad (but compare this to Luke 13:4).

A startling example on how deep the influence of worldview is on our understanding of what the Bible says on suffering can be illustrated by the reactions of church leaders on the Tsunami of 26th December 2004. The Tsunami washed away thousands of lives. Western church leaders were eager to point out that God had nothing to do with it; that this was not a punishment of God, and that we all should pray for the victims and survivors. Meanwhile local Asian church leaders said: it is because of the sins of our countries that this is coming over us. We suffer because of our collective sins. Interestingly, a dominant Asian worldview includes the idea of 'Karma' which holds that "sin" has consequences here on earth. Also note that the Western worldview focuses on the individual, while Eastern worldviews are more focused on community. So the Eastern mind finds it less difficult to accept a collective punishment than the Western mind.

Both Western as Asian church leaders do take the Bible as the Word of God. Both positions can be considered "Biblical." The difference in assessing this Tsunami is created through the lens of two different worldviews. Our worldview will filter our understanding of life and shape our understanding of our Bible.

Reflect: Before proceeding further to consider Christian principles for standing strong, it is important to pause to consider how your own worldview might influence your thinking. Some Christian perspectives may be very different to the views of the

communities, including Christian communities that you serve. Or your own worldview might clash with some perspectives presented in this course.

Take time to consider some of the ideas in your society's worldview by using the exercise below. Scale how far you think each statement is accepted as valid in your society. This will not necessarily be your own opinion – your own worldview may have changed since you became a believer or because of other factors. What is important is that you reflect on what is a valid statement for the average man or woman in the street. If you study this course with other students from your country, compare your answers.

When you have completed this with your wider society in mind, reflect on the extent to which you are (still) connected with the common worldview of your people and how far you differ from the average opinion. Go through the list for a second time, giving you own opinion. That might or might not be the same as the average. There is no "correct" or "incorrect" answer. All statements are argued for and against by Bible readers all over the world.

Attitudes held by my society	Disagree						Agree
You should have an independent opinion on life matters	1	2	3	4	5		
You can rely on an authority person for understanding life matters	1	2	3	4	5		
Every individual is free in his/her life choices	1	2	3	4	5		
You should respect boundaries given by social standing and family	1	2	3	4	5		
You are responsible for your own acts and fate	1	2	3	4	5		
God is responsible for your acts and fate	1	2	3	4	5		
Satan is not able to do you any harm	1	2	3	4	5		
Satan is an active force who can do you harm	1	2	3	4	5		
Church membership is one activity among other activities of life	1	2	3	4	5		
Church membership is living in community	1	2	3	4	5		
Suffering is punishment of God	1	2	3	4	5		
Suffering is there because we are in a broken world	1	2	3	4	5		
Suffering is shameful	1	2	3	4	5		
Suffering is honorable	1	2	3	4	5		
Life should be good	1	2	3	4	5		
If God is with you, suffering will not come near	1	2	3	4	5		

b. The promise of persecution

The question is not: "Will persecution come?" but: "When persecution comes, will I be prepared?"

In preparing for this module you read from John 15 and 16. Notice that the last recorded words of Jesus to his disciples before his arrest are these, in John 16:33: "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Many Christian believers, if thinking about persecution, would comment: "this is never going to happen here." For some, this may well change, in time, to a revised comment: "we thought it would never happen here." There seems to be an unwillingness in us to think beforehand about the theme of persecution. However Jesus made clear in John 16:1-4 that his disciples will face persecution.

Maybe you have already very familiar with persecution. Whether you have already experienced persecution or it remains a future prospect, it is wise to think through the subject of persecution and our responses. Persecution comes in many forms. Maybe you have been raised in a Christian family within a non-Christian society and have always felt marginalised and overlooked. Maybe you are among the growing number of believers from non-Christian backgrounds that is a significant part of the believing community. In many countries in the MENA region this not only brings struggles and pressures for the new believer, but also pressures on the church.

The pressure may come against the pastor or other leaders involved in nurturing or discipling new believers or it may come against the entire community. Sometimes the leaders are prepared for such challenges but the wider church community is not. It is therefore not only leaders who need to be prepared and know how to persevere in rough times; instruction for the community as a whole is needed. If you are leading a church, or group of believers, we suggest that you keep a separate set of notes as we continue with this module, with ideas how to prepare this group or church for persecution.

Jesus told his disciples to expect persecution, but he also gives us the resources to endure when persecution comes. Maybe you noticed this when you made a brief summary of summarised John 15 and 16. We are the branches connected to Jesus, who is the vine. We are in him, He is in us. We have to be steadfast in the Word. Because of our connection with Him, we must love each other and we will be hated by the world. The Holy Spirit has been given to help us bear witness to the Lord Jesus. We don't have to fear persecution, for He is with us.

2: Four reasons for attack.

a. Our connection with Jesus

When we read John 15,16 note that the first reason mentioned for the world's hatred is that we are connected with Jesus (15:18-21). That connection is deeper than a tattoo on your wrist, the fish on your car or the cross at your door. Christ is in you, as you are in Him (see also Colossians 1:27).

Let's see how this spiritual connection with Jesus is seen as a cause for persecution in the book of Acts. When Jesus called Saul to a halt at the gates of Damascus He said, "*Saul, why do you persecute me?*" Let that sink in for a moment. When Saul was going to Damascus, he was not trying to catch Jesus. He considered Jesus to be dead. Saul was after the believers. However when Jesus reveals himself to Saul, He shows Saul an important thing. He was not only persecuting believers – Jesus himself was in the believers. Saul was after Him.

This was the first thing Jesus revealed to Saul. There is a deep connection between Him and those who follow Him. We perhaps find here the reason for the fundamental understanding of Paul that Christ is in us, working and living through us. This is such a dominant theme in the thinking of Paul that some scholars consider "Christ in you" to be the main theme of Paul's theology.¹ There are many texts that speak about this (Romans 8:1,10; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20, 3:27,28, 4:19; Philippians 1:1,14; 2 Corinthians 13:5 – meditate on these scriptures and learn them by heart).

There is an important lesson in this for those who suffer. Even if I am all alone, Christ is in me. I am a living temple of Gods' presence (1 Corinthians 6:19). I can feel isolated, especially when I am under great pressure. Then it is important to realise that being in trouble is not a sign that Christ has abandoned me. He is not only with me (Matthew 28:20), but he is even in me. That's the reason I suffer in the first place. He honours me with his presence. And I do not suffer alone. There is this "mystic" relation between us and Christ. He hears every whisper and reads our deepest thoughts. He is willing to share his thoughts with us, for we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). When we suffer for the sake of Christ, He takes it personally. He suffers through us (2 Corinthians 1:5; Colossians 1:24; Romans 8:17; 2 Corinthians 4:10; 1 Timothy 1:7-10).

God honours me by letting to share in the rejection of Jesus by the people of this world, so I may also share in his glory. Paul says in Romans 8:17,18: "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. For I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory which will be revealed in us."

b. Our testimony about Jesus

The second reason for persecution is given in John 15:27-16:2. Persecution arises to stop the testimony about the name of Jesus. This theme runs through the whole book of Acts. See 4:2, 4:18, 5:40, 9:20-23, 17:7, 21:19. The book ends with this account of Paul: "Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 28:31). In the end, persecution will not be able to stop the proclamation of the gospel. It comes with a price though. It would be worth the effort reading the book of Acts and making notes about every enemy, their strategy and the outcome of the event. You will gain a whole set of possible reasons for persecution and moves the enemy can make against you. And it will enrich you with a whole range of possible reactions: from running as fast as you can, to standing boldly or even facing death.

The reasons that persecutors turn against the followers of Jesus are diverse. However we can be confident that, if we were to ask Paul or Peter why persecution came to them, they would not say it was because that they preached social justice (they did) or were against idols (they were) or because they provoked opposition by acting out of irritation (like in Philippi when Paul exorcised the slave girl). No – they would say that persecution came to them in order to stop their witness about Jesus. Don't get confused by what the enemy tells you about his reasons and pretexts. He knows how

¹ For a full exegetical discussion on this important subject see this online article from Michael Parsons, "In Christ' in Paul," Vox Evangelica 18 (1988): 25-44. http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol18/in-christ_parsons.pdf

to keep us busy with court cases, mobs, and religious debates. All is fine for him if we are prevented from being a witness to Jesus and from bringing others into God's kingdom.

c. The exposing light of Jesus

A third reason for persecution is one referred to several times in the gospel of John. When you read the gospel of John, pay attention to how John uses the word "world." First of all, John says the world is created by God through his Son (John 1:3), and although darkness is now ruling this world, God still loves the world (John 3:16). Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the Word made flesh, comes to this world that is neither willing nor able to recognise him. He comes to his chosen people and even they don't receive him (John 1:11,12). In these verses the word "world" carries the meaning of all mankind.

It becomes clear that God intends to save the world, but the inhabitants of that world must choose to let themselves be saved. The world is enveloped in darkness, in which sin is not exposed (John 3:18,19). Jesus is the real light of that world (John 1:9). The reaction is twofold: those who are attracted to the light are cleansed from their sins (John 1:29) while those who are in love with their sin, or are too proud to admit their sin, hate the light since it exposes their wickedness (John 7:7). The word "world" here carries the meaning of those people who don't want to make the choice to be obedient to Christ. This hatred of the world towards Jesus will be also directed toward those who follow him. So the third reason for persecution is that "the world" does not want to be exposed as being wrong. People take offence against those who are of moral high standing and so make them aware of their own sin. Nobody wants to be reminded on their own sinfulness.

Not only do sinful people take offence when their sinfulness is exposed by the godliness of Christ's followers, but Satan also takes offence. The story par excellence to illustrate this is that of Job. Remember that Job is a remarkable, righteous man. Even God mentions him as being without fault. His righteousness enrages Satan so much that he does all he can to destroy him. Job is hit by three kinds of ordeal, which seem typical in such situations.

Firstly, Job is hit by the ordeals of Satan (though Job did not necessarily know that Satan was behind his trouble). He loses his possessions, children, his health and his marriage. He ends up destitute and curses the day of his birth, but still without sinning. The second ordeal for Job is caused by men. His wife and friends accuse him of being a fool and a sinner. They think that bad things only happen to bad people, so this is their obvious conclusion – that Job brought the whole situation on himself by his own foolish actions. He should confess his sins. Unfortunately, this kind of defamation often occurs for those who are persecuted. Don't be surprised when that happens to you.

The good news is that the third ordeal is a visitation by God. Job is the only person in the book of Job who is found praying – which may well be the reason that he comes into the suffering but is also the reason he comes out of it. He is talking to God, and he is honest with God about his feelings and thoughts. True, he seems confrontational towards God and is not as religiously correct as we might expect for one who is praying. In this, too, he is not sinning. In prayer, honesty goes before courtesy. Since Job decided not to stop talking to God, God decides to talk back to Job. His prayer causes

God to be present in the midst of his suffering. Be encouraged that very many people who go through suffering and persecution testify that when they cried out to God in desperation, they experienced God's presence in a special way.

Note: Now, complete Question (a) of the Review and Discussion Questions at the end of this section, before you continue the lesson.

d. The integrity of our witness for Jesus

Satan wanted Job to stumble and this brings us to the fourth reason why persecution comes. The devil would like to ruin our testimony through our own sinning.

Pause to read Ephesians 6:10-18. Rate yourself: are you living in truth, righteousness, willingness to share the gospel with others, assurance of salvation? Do you know God's Word by heart, are you growing in your faith, do you pray and experience God's power and presence? It is obvious that Satan wants us to sin, which is why we need to be clothed in God's armour. Satan wants us to sin not because we will stand condemned by God, for he knows that if we confess our sins we will be forgiven. Rather, Satan knows that sin cripples our testimony – especially if we deny Christ.

Peter explains further in 1 Peter 5:6-11. He pictures Satan as a lion who wants to devour the believer by persecution. Of course Satan is not coming in a visible form as a real lion. What is it that Peter is meaning?² The Roman persecutors in the time of Peter wanted the believers to bring an offering to the emperor as being God. That of course means a denial of Jesus as Lord. For the persecutor this would be a sign of proper citizenship. However Peter looks into the spiritual reality and sees the devil seeking to devour the believers. What ultimately is at stake here is that the devil wants to make the believer deny Christ as Lord and Savior.

This devouring of Satan is not that you are killed by him. Here is the paradox of Christianity. Jesus was killed by Satan's agents, and by dying He became victor. So the devouring of Satan is not that we are killed by him. Satan's devouring is to push us over the edge of fear, into denial of our faith in Christ. Peter certainly knew what he was talking about, since he himself had come to that point of denial. How reassuring to know there is hope for restoration though, as Peter discovered. Another early Christian who discovered this was a lady called Biblias.

The Roman historian Eusebius preserved the story of Biblias, recording it in his second century epistle concerning martyrs of the churches of Vienne and Lyon (in France). In this letter we see how the early church explained what it means to be devoured by Satan. As happened many times with persecution, the persecutor is not interested in the truth of our faith. He is ready to bring false accusations against the believers. A specific false accusation brought against Christians in that time was that when they celebrated the Lord's Supper they did not eat bread and wine, but that they stabbed babies to death and ate their flesh and drank their blood. Eusebius narrates:

² A short remark on visionary experience of the devil must be made. With the rise of witchcraft in the Middle East it might be good to realise that if someone has been involved in witchcraft or other forms of occultism, people might report to have extra sensory or paranormal encounters with this enemy. In such a case wise prayer counseling is needed. However, normally Satan is working behind the scenes and acts through people and circumstances.

"But the devil, thinking that he had already consumed Biblias, who was one of those who had denied Christ, desiring to increase her condemnation through the utterance of blasphemy, brought her again to the torture, to compel her, as already feeble and weak, to report impious things concerning us. But she recovered herself under the suffering, and as if awaking from a deep sleep, and reminded by the present anguish of the eternal punishment in hell, she contradicted the blasphemers. 'How,' she said, 'could those eat children who do not think it lawful to taste the blood even of irrational animals?' And thenceforward she confessed herself a Christian, and was given a place in the order of the witnesses."³

This story has a glorious ending, because the lady was willing to take a stand again for Christ. The devil could not ruin her testimony. Even after an initial failure to stand strong, a deeper grace was waking her up. The church of Vienne was a praying church. It is interesting that Eusebius emphasises the devouring work of the devil, and it again suggests a parallel with Peter. The night before his trial, Jesus said to Peter: "*Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*" (Luke 22:31.) Note that, like Biblias, Peter also denied Jesus, but this did not lead to a spiritual death. Why not? Jesus had prayed for him. We know Peter was subsequently restored by Jesus.

Here the crucial point is that prayer will save the believer, even if he fails to stand through the first trials of persecution. Don't think that a brother or sister facing persecution will make it on their own, against the crafty adversary. He or she needs our prayers. Jesus taught us, when we pray, to ask for deliverance from the evil one. Jesus was aware of the spiritual reality behind men's actions, and he prayed about this. There is a strong power in prayer that can prevent people from falling and can restore those who failed during persecution. Although Peter failed, he was restored into the community by Jesus even into a position of leadership (John 22:15).

Review and Discussion Questions

- a. **Reflect:** Can you understand why people feel upset when it is pointed out they do something wrong? How do you feel when someone points out you are wrong? What can you learn from this? Do you think you should or should not point out the sins of other people? Take in account the texts from John, mentioned in part c. of this section.
- b. **Pray:** Take a short break to pray specifically for a person you know who is under persecution or who has denied Christ under pressure.

³ Eusebius of Caesaria. (1890). The Church History of Eusebius. In P. Schaff & H. Wace (Red.), A. C. McGiffert (Vert.), *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine* (Vol. 1, p. 214). New York: Christian Literature Company.

3. Know your enemy

a. *The world and its ruler*

To understand persecution better, we need to focus further on this enemy behind the scenes. Some might be wary, preferring to focus on God and maybe even afraid that focusing on Satan attracts his attention. Realise, however, that the Bible often speaks about our enemy Satan. Seven books in the Old Testament and every writer in the New Testament refer to him. Of the 29 direct references in the Gospels to him, Jesus is speaking in 25 of them. We need to know what the Bible teaches about this enemy, whom we're told "has been sinning from the beginning" (1 John 3:8). Paul wrote that we should not let Satan take advantage of us by being ignorant of his schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11).

There is more to this world than the eye meets. According to John, the ruler of this world is Satan (John 14:30, 12:31, 16:11). So John refers here to "the world" as meaning humanity in its rebellion against God; it stands in partnership with the prince of this world, Satan, against God. Dongel writes:

"This means that the "kingdom of evil" operates as an enterprise in the realm of both the human and the suprahuman, or that beyond human. An intelligent, suprahuman 'prince' stands at the helm, orchestrating all rebellion against God and God's purposes. This accounts in large measure for the apparent 'intelligence' of evil, its capacity to find and exploit opportunities to pervert and destroy in sophisticated ways. On one hand, the world has been captured by Satan, unable to free itself from his program of hostility to God and destruction of God's creation (see Ephesians 2:1–3)."⁴

It's good to realise that behind the persecution by man, there is a mastermind scheming the events. It is helpful to look at the suffering of Jesus. Although the Synoptic Gospels do not state this so openly, the Gospel of John describes Satan as the main actor in the death of Jesus. Sitting at the Passover meal, Jesus dipped some bread and gave it to Judas. John says "Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him." (John 13:26,27).

Beasley-Murray has the following observation on this small conversation between Judas and Jesus: "That Jesus, the host, handed to Judas bread that he had dipped in the dish is more plausibly a sign of favour than of hostility. In such a setting the action and the word would have been deeply significant. Jesus gives to Judas a sign of friendship, despite knowing the intention of his heart. His statement, 'What you are about to do, do quickly,' has the effect of setting Judas in the place of decision: he must make up his mind either to respond to Jesus' goodwill, and so repent of his plan to betray him, or to spurn it and carry out his intentions."⁵ Jesus offered Judas a last window of escape. Besides this, He did something very important. He showed his love

⁴ Dongell, J. (1997). *John: a Bible commentary in the Wesleyan tradition* (p. 158). Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House.

⁵ Beasley-Murray, G. R. (2002). *John* (Vol. 36, p. 238). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

to the man who was about to betray Him and hand Him over to his persecutors. He offered him bread, and asked him to reconsider.

Jesus neither prevented Satan from taking over Judas' mind, nor stopped Judas in his tracks by some divine force. Judas had his own responsibility and had made his own choices. Judas' own thoughts and choices made it possible for Satan to work out his schemes through him.

The second text that needs further consideration is where Jesus, hanging on the cross, shouts to God to forgive his persecutors, since "they do not know what they do." Consider Jesus' words carefully. He did not say, "forgive them, because they don't believe me." Suppose a reporter had been on the spot. He would go with that statement to the authorities and ask them, "Do you know what you just did?" They might reply, "Of course we know what we did. We served our country well by getting this political threat out of the way. [John 12:49.50]. Besides, that, this man is a blasphemer. He says he's the Son of God". So why is Jesus saying they do not know what they do?

If a reporter went to Pilate with the same question, he would answer, "Of course I know what I did. I served the Roman interest in this region well. I disagreed with the Jewish leaders, but I need to work with them." All kinds of political and religious interest were involved in this process. And although there were no mass media at that time, even the masses were urged by the priest to shout for the crucifixion of Christ. Mass demagoguery is nothing new. Satan has been, and is still, building structures around the world to keep the kingdom of God out. He uses politics, he uses religion, he uses media and the outrage of the crowds.

Besides the considerations of humans, greater spiritual forces are at work. First of all, Jesus' suffering is in the will of God his Father, because through this suffering atonement will be made. Second, Satan, unwillingly, is the agent that makes it happen. And Satan is using men who are blinded by their fears and hatred. The leaders and soldiers who were involved in Jesus' suffering didn't see these spiritual realities – the reality of God and the reality of Satan. However, this does not take away their responsibility – which is why Jesus prayed that they would be forgiven for their role!

What does this mean for our situation? The answer is not the development of our own media strategies, nor trying to outsmart the theology of other religions – but a willingness to live in the will of God and accept that suffering will be part of that, until Jesus returns. Knowing that there are darker forces at work in human life, who put them over the edge of cruelty, may help to forgive the persecutors.

To forgive is a powerful spiritual act that Jesus taught us to do – to forgive those who hurt you, to love your enemy and to bless who curse you. Sometimes this commandment is too easily repeated in the face of those who are seriously hurt. To forgive can be hard. It takes time and often this forgiveness is more a process than a once and for all statement. It is wise to think about the importance of forgiveness before you are deeply hurt, so you are better prepared to apply it when you need to.

God the father takes this very seriously (Mark 11:25), and so should we. To forgive helps us to let go of our anger, so we don't give the devil a foothold (Eph 4:26.27). To forgive prevents us becoming bitter (Ephesians 4:31,32; Hebrews 12:15). Every experienced

counselor can tell you that if you cannot forgive others, or if you cannot forgive yourself for your own failures, this becomes a major root for a disturbed soul. Learning to forgive and to receive forgiveness is a key element for a sound spiritual life. It brings clarity of mind to you. It will help you to grieve over your loss, without becoming bitter.

Romans 12:19-21 makes clear that God, not us, is responsible for serving justice. We are called to leave vengeance to God, instead overcoming evil through good. He promises to be our comforter and helper. This can be difficult in a culture of revenge, where to forgive might seem a sign of weakness. However when we are weak, God's power can be strong in us. The following story illustrates how that can work.

Some years ago I met a brother who was overseeing a great evangelistic and training network in Asia. We discussed possible reactions on persecution. He told me this story. "There was a Christian student on a campus in my country. He was openly telling about his faith, had Bible studies and people started coming to faith. The ring-leader of a radical religious group sent him a note demanding that he stop the Bible studies, or face the consequence. He did not agree to this demand. So the ringleader set him up and brought him to his place. They beat him up terribly and threw him out on the street. I don't know how this brother had the courage to come back to that place.

However, two days later, the ringleader had a knock on his door and there was the young evangelist. Broken arm, swollen face, but he managed a smile and said, "I am here to say I forgive you" and then he went away." I raised my eyebrow when the brother told me this story. "And then?" I asked. He smiled: "I was that ringleader," he said. "I could have handled it if he had come in with police officers, or with a gang to beat me up. I couldn't handle his loving attitude, I knew this was because his God was true. His forgiveness brought me to Christ."

Note: Now, complete Question (a) of the Review and Discussion Questions at the end of this section, before you continue the lesson.

b. Countering the enemy's tactics

We have noted that Satan is the active ruler of 'the world.' He can turn against us by the use of political, economic and religious leadership and structures that are in his control. He can turn against us with outraged mobs. However, all of those things come from the outside. The most subtle and dangerous weapon of Satan might not be the use of violence, but the game he plays in our minds.

According to Paul, when Satan attacks us, he focuses on our mind, just as he did with Eve, see (2 Corinthians 11:3). Pause to consider how Satan deceived Eve:

Note: Now, complete Question (b) of the Review and Discussion Questions at the end of this section, before you continue the lesson.

Many aspects of this first deception are still used by Satan today. Did you notice how Satan did not show himself, using the snake to do the job? Satan stays in the background and Eve is unaware that she is dealing with a spiritual enemy. As a matter of fact, Eve does not initially realise the snake is an enemy. Did you notice that when the snake speaks about God, he does not use the covenant name of God (YHWH). Did

you notice that the snake suggests he knows things about God and his commandments that Eve is not aware of? He twists God's words, making Eve feel afraid and insecure and wondering whether she can trust God.

Did you notice how the snake creates a sense of urgency?

Eve decides not to trust God and she takes the initiative to resolve her now apparently vulnerable situation. She does not consult with Adam, nor with God. She decides on the spot that if God is not to be trusted, then at least she should have the same level of knowledge as him. Did you notice that the snake never commands Eve to eat the fruit? Her own fear drives her to sin. Eve rejects God and seeks to take charge of her own life. She loves her own life more than God. So the movement goes from fear to pride to willful sinning. Did you notice that there is no mention of spiritual or physical force. Satan played on her mind and she gave in. She is responsible for her actions.

This story gives a prototype of how Satan deals with us. Satan knows how to trigger a series of negative emotions that will lead us to doubting the goodness of God. This will bring us to sin, and ultimately in times of persecution it can bring the denial of faith. How does this work in practice? Satan will not reveal to you he is attacking you. He uses more stealthy means, planting thoughts in your mind. Of course Satan will not just play on your mind but will use other means, books, conversations, TV programs etc. He plants thoughts to make you emotionally unstable; to generate fear, anger or sorrow; to lead you to sin.

Note: Now, complete Question (c) of the Review and Discussion Questions at the end of this section, before you continue the lesson.

Our emotions and thoughts are closely connected. For many people, an encounter like this in the mall will disturb them emotionally. When we are overwhelmed by emotion we may be more quick to make wrong decisions.

It is easy to think that everybody will react in the same way to a certain situation – for example, in anger or fear. But that is not the case. No situation itself determines how we feel. It is our evaluation of that situation that determines how we feel about it. Our feelings of fear or anger or defeat do not arise from the situation but from our mindset; how we evaluate the situation at hand. Consider this example: if my friend calls me and says he has been fired from his job, I may expect him to be disappointed or angry. But in fact he sounds happy! When I ask him about this, he explains frankly that he was not enjoying his job and is pleased he can now move on to something new. It is not the situation itself (being fired) but his evaluation of that situation that determines how he feels and reacts.

Consider also a Biblical example. Place yourself in the shoes of Peter and John. They have been imprisoned by the temple police, and have been brought to court. There they receive a severe beating issued by the Sanhedrin. How you would feel returning home from the police station after receiving this severe beating for because you were evangelising. I would probably be moaning, angry, full of self-pity – and my wife would be very worried! But look at Peter and John's reaction in Acts 5:41. "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."

The apostles did not seek the persecution. Shortly beforehand, an angel of God had freed them from prison and had sent them back to the temple to preach. They considered this situation as God's approval on their ministry. The beating was not beyond of what God approved for their life. It was not "out of God's hand." They probably evaluated the situation in the light of the sayings of Jesus in Matthew 5:11-12. They knew they had been shamed in the eyes of man, but they had learned a different perspective on shame and honour. They had realised you can't seek the honour of both men and God, and they chose to receive honour from God. (See John 5: 41,44).

The devil brought them into this situation, and hoped to install thoughts in them that would produce fear, self-pity or embarrassment. But he failed. Peter and John had a biblical view. They knew the truth. They did the same as Jesus when he was tempted by Satan – they clung to the Word of God, being more important than the truth of men.

For that reason we have to guard our minds above all. Paul writes to the persecuted church of the Philippians that they should not be anxious about anything (!) but pray and keep their thinking pure (Philippians 4:6-9). A biblical way of thinking leads to peace. We are in danger when we stop praying and start fearing. Or when we stop praying and start thinking about revenge. Or when we stop praying and start telling ourselves how miserable we are.

Fear, though very natural, is a very great enemy. Fear of losing face, fear of losing beloved ones, fear of pain. When we become fearful of these things we let the devil fill our minds with ungodly thoughts. We don't have peace. When we fill our minds with God's promises and the sayings of Jesus, we will receive peace. So Paul urges the church to think straight: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things." (Philippians 4:8). The fruit of the spirit includes self-control, love, peace and joy (Galatians 5:19). A child of God is promised peace and should not live out of fear, anger or sorrow. We will certainly experience these emotions, but it is not God's intention that these control us.

[Note: Now, complete Question \(d\) of the Review and Discussion Questions at the end of this section, before you continue the lesson.](#)

We can consider the fear of death as an example of how the above exercise might be applied. The fear of death is very common – death seems to be the end, nothingness; death is painful at every level; I will be alone if loved ones die and they will be alone if I die; I will face judgment. But if you use a concordance or search option to find out what Scripture says about death, you will be reminded that it is temporal (1 Corinthians 15); that you will stay connected to Jesus, living through him (John 11:25,26); that you will be in the house of God the Father, who has prepared a place for you (John 14:1-6); that death can't separate you from God's love (Romans 8:33-39); that being with the Lord is better than life now (Philippians 1:23). It is important now not to brush away the negative emotions but to deliberately confront them in the light of God's word. Jesus did overcome temptation by quoting Scripture. We too must develop a Biblical worldview, and learning key texts by heart can be very helpful.

Dealing with strong emotions is not achieved in a simple exercise like this. It is a lifelong process, called sanctification – involving honesty, prayer, and confession. Admit to God

the lies you believed and consciously reject them. Ask God to lead you in every situation He wants you to go through. If we humble ourselves for God, he will lift us up. And when we resist the devil, the devil will flee (James 4:7). To rebuke the devil is what Jesus did when tempted. He commanded the devil to leave him alone, and he gives us an example we can follow when tempted (Matthew 4:10). Satan will listen to your rebuke (see Luke 10:19). Commit yourself to meditating on Scripture, and to being open with God about your feelings. He loves you and knows all about you (Matthew 10:29-31).

A last word on dealing with fear. When trouble or persecution hits your life, be assured that there is no sin in being afraid. Jesus was afraid in the garden of Gethsemane, yet he did not sin. He prayed and pleaded with God his Father to be delivered from his suffering. Luke 22:42 says an Angel came to strengthen Him. Stephen, when martyred, received a vision by the Holy Spirit of an open heaven (Acts 7:55). Scripture is clear – if God gives you the honour of suffering for Christ, he will sustain you. Jesus promises that he will be with you, to the ends of the world (Matthew 28:20). So in our suffering, even our dying, God the Father, the Son and the Spirit and their angels, will be with us.

Review and Discussion Questions

- a. **Reflect/Pray:** Place yourself in God's presence and honestly ask yourself if there are currently people in your family, church, work, and social network whom you need to forgive. Be explicit. Describe for yourself what they have done, and what the consequence was of that action for your feelings, relationship, honour etc. Then say, 'Lord I forgive... for what he/she has done (be explicit with God) that causes for me (be honest with God)..... I leave the revenge with you. Comfort me.'
- b. **Exercise:** Read Genesis 3:1-8 and write down how you think Satan builds his argument towards Eve to lead her into disobedience.
- c. **Exercise:** Imagine you are queuing at the shopping mall with your family. Suddenly someone steps in front of you, spits in your face and shouts that he has the right to be served before a Christian 'dog.' Your son starts crying. Be honest with yourself. What is it that you feel, what will you think. What does happen inside of you. Will you be angry? Ashamed? Fearful? Sorrow for your son? Other emotions? Write down what you think you will feel.
- d. **Exercise:**
 - i. List the thing(s) you fear most – fears that have a tendency to control you. List the thing(s) that makes you angry – that tends to flare up regularly and have a form of control in your life. List the thing(s) that gives you sorrow – that pre-occupy you.
 - ii. Reflect on the situations typically give rise to that fear/anger/sorrow, and reflect on why these emotions arise. Then evaluate your thoughts in the light of God's Word.

4. Know your identity

Based on what you tell a psychologist about your family origin, they can predict quite accurately how you will feel about yourself and if you are vulnerable for certain issues in your life. Family is important for us. It defines deeply who we are. The extended family is also an important resource to be successful in life.

Through the family line, sin also entered our lives, for we are all related to Adam and Eve (Romans 5). We sin because we are sinners by birth. But when we came to Christ and started following him, we were born again (John 1:12, John 3:1ff, 2 Corinthians 5:14-17) and became children of God (Ephesians 5:1,8; Philippians 2:15; 1 John 3:1ff). It means that coming to Christ gives you a new Father in heaven and brings you into the extended family of God on earth.

This new identity changes how we think about our daily life. Paul says that since Christ died for us, we should not live for ourselves. Our life belongs to Him (2 Corinthians 5:15). Our focus should be on heaven and our longing should be for Christ – to be in his presence (Colossians 3:1-4). Success in our earthly life is no longer our longing. We are homesick for heaven. John says: *"See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear children, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."* (1 John 3:1,2).

This new relation with God as our Father, changes the direction of our heart towards the things of God, rather than the things considered by this world to be important. Secondly, it changes our relationship with our earthly family. Of course, Jesus emphasised the commandment that we should honour our parents. We should talk respectfully about them and care for their needs when they become older. However even Jesus, although he deeply loved and respected his earthly mother, prioritised obedience to God above respect for his family. Read the conversation in Matthew 12:46-50. When it comes to the question of to whom we belong, Jesus notes that it is not longer earthly family ties that are the most important, but our ties to God and to the other people who do his will.

Jesus pictures the believers as a family, and he predicted that our earthly family would even be willing to kill us, for our allegiance to Him. He depicts us as sheep walking among a pack of wolves, warning us to be wise in our communication with them (Matthew 10:16), going on to warn frankly that our earthly families may turn against us for His sake (Matthew 10:21-22). But in Mark 10:28-30 Jesus assures Peter that those who leave their earthly families for His sake will not fail to be richly compensated, in this present age (with new family in the body of believers, as well as persecution!), and in the age to come.

The greatest thing about this new family relationship is that Jesus himself is willing to act in your life as your eldest brother. In the Old Testament, the eldest brother would redeem family members who were in trouble. He would avenge deaths, pay debts, ensure inheritance arrangements. Aspects of this 'kinsman-redeemer' role are still present within Middle Eastern culture.

Hebrew 2:11 says that Jesus wants to be that brother for us. He is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. The context in Hebrews 2 is hugely encouraging – almighty God provided the perfect Saviour; perfect through what he suffered for us; he who saves and we who are saved are of the same family; Jesus testifies to us about the Father as our brother; we have been given to him by our Father; he shared in our

humanity in order by his death to defeat Satan's power – we are freed not just from death but also from the *fear* of death! (Read Hebrews 2:10-15).

So whatever the suffering we face, Jesus, our eldest brother, has faced it, endured it, conquered it. And he gives us the resources (mercy, wisdom, power, holiness, endurance) to help us in our walk with God. Whatever your mistakes, sins or failures, he is willing to cover up for you. He paid the price on your head with his blood. He will help you to testify in a wise way, strengthen you with comfort and guide you into his extended family. We must ask Him and trust the guidance of his Holy Spirit.

To summarise, it is clear that our choice to follow Christ may have harsh consequences for our relationships within our earthly family. However, this is foretold and is not without hope. Christ has provided a new extended family here on earth and for eternity. He himself is our eldest brother and God is our Father. While it is important for our identity to be in strong relationships with our earthly family, it is even more important to be connected with our new spiritual family and to draw our identity principally from that family.

Paul uses another metaphor of being connected with this spiritual family as he speaks about the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Note that "the church" is not a building, nor an organisation – but an organism, a spiritual entity with Christ as her head. His life is in us and he is bestowing spiritual gifts upon each of us. It is his intention that we grow together, that we become mutually responsible for each other. Being together as believers will strengthen your resilience in times of persecution.

There are many reasons why we may not connect with other believers. It might be the fear of betrayal that causes you to remain isolated. It might be that you come from a Christian background and are member of a church, but that you dare not connect with new believers from the majority faith background. Such fears are very understandable. However, when you are alone you are vulnerable. When you are alone you are starved of vital fellowship. When you are alone you are deprived of the gifts that your brothers and sisters bring. When you are alone you are deprived of the opportunity to serve them with the gifts you have been given.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, which makes clear that each part of the body needs every other part of the body! This is not about attending 'church.' This is about family life. The building blocks of the body of Christ are people, not the stones of a building. It is a fact that living in fellowship with other believers who themselves have a living relation with God through Christ, will strengthen you in times of trouble.

Review and Discussion Questions

Read 1 Corinthians 12.

- a. What part of the body you consider yourself to be?
- b. Are you aware of any spiritual gifts in your life? If not, ask God to reveal this to you.
- c. Are you connected to a (small) group of believers at this moment? If so, praise God for these brothers and sisters. Consider ways in which you can support each other in the group, especially through times of difficulty and pressure.
- d. If you are not connected with a group, pray that God will bring you into contact with family members.

- e. Reflect on whether there are obstacles to fellowship, such as fear or mistrust (for example of "new believers"). Pray for the strength to overcome these obstacles.
- f. Write down some practical steps you can take to develop stronger relationships with your brothers and sisters.

Conclusion

To conclude this module, we simply turn to a passage of Scripture which summarises our discussion far more profoundly than other words will be able. These familiar verses from Paul's letter to the Romans have been a great comfort for many who have been through trials and persecution.

Romans 8:15-39:

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life –

is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble of 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.

Exercises

- (a) Memorise sections of this passage, or (better still!) the whole passage. Meditate on these verses in the coming weeks.
- (b) The extra reading material (Glenn Penner) includes a detailed testimony from Richard Wurmbrand.
 - (i) Make a note of the tactics used by the enemy to discourage and tempt Wurmbrand
 - (ii) Which biblical principles were important in helping Wurmbrand stand strong?
 - (iii) Reflect on whether similar tactics are used by the enemy in your own ministry context, and consider ways in which the same biblical principles can help you stand strong.

Additional Reading

"The Call of Discipleship, the Call of the Cross" (excerpts): Penner, Glenn, *In the Shadow of the Cross; A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship*, Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004: p116-135

Lesson Four Evaluation

Evaluation Test, Suggestion 1.

Read through the gospel of Matthew and make notes on all texts that deal with resistance and suffering. Identify the reasons, promises and encouragements Jesus gives for those who suffer. Don't forget to include the example of Jesus dealing with suffering.

Evaluation Test, Suggestion 2.

Read through the book of Acts. Note each occasion on which the apostles face opposition and persecution. Write a summary of each of these situations, noting the reasons for persecution, the reactions of the believers, and the outcome or results of the persecution. For each situation identify at least one principle that will help you and others to endure in times of persecution.

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