

## ***Persecuted: Faith in the Face of Suffering***

Good morning!

I've always been enamored with mysteries and detective stories, especially the great Sherlock Holmes.

His observations are always a treat when he deciphers a person's life by a few scuffs of a shoe, a thread on a jacket, or a smudge on a thumb. He pays attention, and it's always entertaining to watch his brilliant deductions.

As believers in Christ, genuine followers of Jesus, we experience some form persecution every day...and if you're vigilant like Sherlock Holmes, it's with an ever-increasing volume. You cannot turn on a television, read a newspaper or watch a movie without some attack being foisted on believers or on our biblical values.

We live in a changing society. As recently as one generation ago, the tide of persecution against believers was tame in comparison to today. The opposition that your parents experienced as Christians is dramatically different for us now.

For Christians, America is not the same country in 2014 as it was in 1974. There are attacks underway.

Some are subtle and some are overt, but the persecution gets ratcheted up every day. If you're paying attention, you can pick them out of the media's churn of innuendo and questions. The very stories that are chosen to report, and the ones that are ignored, reflect a bias that is becoming more and more overt from our "gatekeepers of information."

Our secular culture, similar to what Daniel experienced in his Babylonian Captivity, has become less and less tolerant of a belief in God, and like Daniel we have to make some hard choices to take a stand with God. It may cost you a relationship, a reputation, a job, or perhaps even more than that.

Make no mistake...like Daniel, we are behind enemy lines, and taking a stand will grow more and more difficult as the day draws nearer for Christ's return. It takes real faith to trust God when things look bleak, and then to stand with Him. That's why I think you'll appreciate this new movie ***Persecuted***.

Without giving too much away, here's the logline for ***Persecuted***:

*John Luther, a well-known evangelist, refuses to support a new religious reform bill that seems too ecumenical and as a result, a U.S. Senator has him framed for murder to get him out of the way. Luther becomes a fugitive and is on the cusp of a wave of persecution that will threaten the entire American Church. What can one man do?*

Let's take a look at Luther's battle in the trailer:

[Persecution Trailer](#)

This morning we'll take a look at persecution... **Faith in the Face of Suffering.**

## Direct Persecution

In the distant past, Christians experienced life and death persecution almost immediately after Christ's resurrection. In 67 A.D., under the Emperor Nero, they experienced deadly mass persecution for the first time. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, this is what Nero did to cover up his destruction of Rome by fire:

*"Therefore, to stop the rumor [that he had set Rome on fire], he [Emperor Nero] falsely charged with guilt, and punished with the most fearful tortures, the persons commonly called Christians, who were [generally] hated for their enormities. Christus, the founder of that name, was put to death as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea, in the reign of Tiberius, but the pernicious superstition - repressed for a time, broke out yet again, not only through Judea, - where the mischief originated, but through the city of Rome also, whither all things horrible and disgraceful flow from all quarters, as to a common receptacle, and where they are encouraged. Accordingly first those were arrested who confessed they were Christians; next on their information, a vast multitude were convicted, not so much on the charge of burning the city, as of "hating the human race."*

Nero (who also murdered his wife and mother) had Christians put into shirts of wax, fixed to axletrees, and lit on fire to illuminate his gardens. He also had them sewed into the skins of wild beasts and had dogs tear them apart for sport. Peter and Paul were executed during Nero's reign, crucified and beheaded, respectively.

In the last century, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao all murdered Christians. No one knows for sure how many of the millions and millions murdered by these men were believers, but we know Hitler murdered 11 million people, Stalin had over 20 million people killed, and Mao murdered 45 million Chinese.

One of the most well known Christian martyrs was a German pastor in Nazi Germany – Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was eventually taken to prison for two years, and then Flossenbug Concentration Camp where he was hung...one month before Germany surrendered. All because of his role in trying to rescue Jews from concentration camps.

Listen to this eyewitness account by a physician who was there at Bonhoeffer's death:

*"On the morning of that day between five and six o'clock the prisoners were taken from their cells and the verdicts of the court martial read out to them. Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb,*

*kneeling on the floor, praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this unusually lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."*

Perhaps the most famous quote on persecution comes from this humble German pastor, who speaks wisdom for all of us today:

*"First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me."*

In our century, North Korea, Iran, and China persecute Christ's followers daily. We experience persecution here in the United States too. Certainly not to the point of death and torture like we've seen under these other dictators, but can that day be far off?

As you watch this pivotal scene from ***Persecution*** remember Edmund Burke's famous quote, "*The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.*"

[Film clip 39:47 to 43:11 \(The Park Bench\)](#)

## **Indirect Persecution**

Other persecution is less obvious, and much more subtle, like the slow boil of the frog in the pot who is dead before he realizes his fate, it is indirect and usually begins with an attack on biblical values.

Abortion has now become Pro-Choice, a much better PR term than Abortion. Sodomy is now called Gay, and the destruction of traditional marriage is now disguised as a civil rights issue (who isn't in favor of civil rights?).

If a Christian stands up for the life of the unborn, they are now against women and women's health...even though 55 million American babies, nearly rivaling the numbers of Mao, Hitler, and Stalin, have been murdered without a choice. If a believer cites the Bible as a moral compass against allowing perverse sexual practices, they are labeled intolerant and a homophobe.

What we see is a "slow boil" persecution, gradually twisting a biblical conviction into a perversion of intolerance, and then eventual outright attacks. Is it any wonder this ***Persecuted*** film has come about at this time? John Luther's example reminds us of one of the most famous persecutions of all.

## Daniel's Example

The Old Testament is filled with examples of Jewish persecution and enslavement. Let's take a look at one of the prime examples of faith amidst persecution in the Old Testament....Daniel.

In the New Testament, Daniel is only mentioned by name once (Matthew 24:15), and in Hebrews 11, Daniel gets only five anonymous words, but they are five of the most amazing words, "...*shut the mouths of lions*...."

*"And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, **shut the mouths of lions**, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight (Hebrews 11:32-34)."*

As you probably know, Daniel was carried off in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians when they conquered and destroyed Jerusalem, God's punishment for Israel's disobedience. As Daniel rose in favor with King Darius, the other leaders became jealous and tried to destroy him.

Let's look at Daniel 6:4ff...

*"Then the commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or evidence of corruption, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was to be found in him. Then these men said, "We will not find any ground of accusation against this Daniel unless we find it against him with regard to the law of his God." Then these commissioners and satraps came by agreement to the king and spoke to him as follows: "King Darius, live forever! "All the commissioners of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the high officials and the governors have consulted together that the king should establish a statute and enforce an injunction that anyone who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, shall be cast into the lions' den. "Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document so that it may not be changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked." Therefore King Darius signed the document, that is, the injunction. Now when Daniel knew that the document was signed, he entered his house (now in his roof chamber he had windows open toward Jerusalem); and he continued kneeling on his knees three times a day, praying and giving thanks before his God, as he had been doing previously. Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and supplication before his God. Then they approached and spoke before the king about the king's injunction, "Did you not sign an injunction that any man who makes a petition to any god or man besides you, O king, for thirty days, is to be cast into the lions' den?" The king replied, "The statement is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians,*

*which may not be revoked." Then they answered and spoke before the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the injunction which you signed, but keeps making his petition three times a day." Then, as soon as the king heard this statement, he was deeply distressed and set his mind on delivering Daniel; and even until sunset he kept exerting himself to rescue him. Then these men came by agreement to the king and said to the king, "Recognize, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no injunction or statute which the king establishes may be changed." Then the king gave orders, and Daniel was brought in and cast into the lions' den. The king spoke and said to Daniel, "Your God whom you constantly serve will Himself deliver you."*

We all know how this turned out...God "shut the mouths of the lions." And then this happened:

*"Then the king was very pleased and gave orders for Daniel to be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den and no injury whatever was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. The king then gave orders, and they brought those men who had maliciously accused Daniel, and they cast them, their children and their wives into the lions' den; and they had not reached the bottom of the den before the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones."*

I don't want to give away the movie too much, but John Luther is thrust into his own den of lions where he has to trust God just like Daniel. He has to take a stand, as Edmund Burke said. He needs to speak out, like Bonhoeffer learned too late. In short, he has to act with courage, no matter what that means personally.

So what is the take-away lesson for us today? What can we do to imitate these men who stood up for their faith and their God?

## **A Majority**

First of all, it's important to realize that as a Christian you are never alone.

*'Do not fear, for **I am with you**; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10).'*

Let's look at the example of Gideon in Judges 6:11-16, a deliverer or "judge" for Israel, who was nothing special.

*"Then the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior." Then Gideon said to him, "O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His*

*miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." The Lord looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" He said to Him, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house." But the Lord said to him, "Surely **I will be with you**, and you shall defeat Midian as one man."*

We find our hero Gideon in a pit, a winepress. He was so afraid of the marauding Midianites that he didn't have the courage to thresh his wheat up on a hill where the wind could separate the chaff, but hid in a pit when the Angel of the Lord appears to him and says, "Hail, mighty warrior!"

Is this angelic greeting a sarcastic joke? No, more likely than naught, it was a reputation for Gideon to live up to based on his faith (which was clearly weak) because he eventually took a stand for God with only 300 men...and defeated the Midianites in a classic battle with only 300 men!

We see that God used a weak man who was made strong because of his faith...in God, not himself, as we see when Israel tries to make Gideon king. He refuses and gives the credit to God (Judges 8:22-23). And here's our takeaway—God uses average people to do great things for him based on their faith.

The same Holy Spirit that gave Gideon courage and faith is also inside of you, so no matter what circumstance or whomever you face, the Lord plus one is always a majority.

As Jesus said in Matthew 28, *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

## **Battle Wisely**

Let's look at one more average guy, a teenage boy really, a simple shepherd named David:

*"This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the Lord's and He will give you into our hands (1 Samuel 17:46-47)."*

Prayerfully consider what you want to stand up for and realize it is not your battle, per se. You do not want to "war" in the secular sense. This is a battle of ideology.

Like David and Goliath, *"the battle is the Lord's"* battle (1 Samuel 17:47), and we are simply standing up with Him...in love. We do not want to win the battle (argument or

issue) and lose the war (influencing the opposition for Christ). Remember Paul's words to Timothy:

*"The goal of our instruction is love...(1 Timothy 1:5)."*

You do not want to win in such a way that you alienate or turn others away from the Lord. This may not be possible every time, but you want to act as lovingly as possible in your faith knowing they are not the enemy. They are captives of the enemy that you can hopefully free with your righteous stand.

In closing, let's remember Joshua's immortal words to Israel in Joshua 1:7-9:

*"Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord **your God is with you** wherever you go."*

Ultimately, we know according to the Book of Revelation that the day is coming when our religious liberties are going to be completely taken away, and our very lives. It is inevitable, but until then we need to take a stand like Gideon, David, Daniel, and John Luther. We are behind enemy lines, but we are not alone in our fight.

Let's pray.