

According to a Christian Post article dated December 17, 2020, tens of thousands of house church pastors and evangelists across China have gone into hiding as the Communist Party prepares for what seems like a “final assault” on Christianity in an attempt to eradicate it from the country, according to missions group Asia Harvest.

In its final newsletter for 2020, Asia Harvest said pastors have disconnected from their phones and computers so that government authorities can no longer use those devices to track their movements. These pastors have also reportedly destroyed the microchips inside their ID cards so authorities cannot track their locations using those devices either.

“Each person in China must have an ID card. It is impossible for a person to catch a flight or train, open a bank account, get a job, or rent an apartment without using their card. Each ID card contains a computer chip which is also used to track people's movements,” the newsletter added.

While Asia Harvest declined The Christian Post's request for an interview, the Post has reported on many of the key concerns regarding rising persecution that are mentioned in its newsletter, including the regime's attempts to "corrupt the Gospel" by rewriting biblical accounts.

One example of this is a communist textbook that's being used in Chinese schools that falsifies the biblical account found in John 8:3-11. The textbook claims that Jesus murdered the woman who was found in adultery and then referred to Himself as a sinner, too.

The textbook, published by the government run University of Electronic Science and Technology Press, states: “The crowd wanted to stone the woman to death as per their law. But Jesus said, ‘Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone.’ Hearing this, they slipped away one by one. When the crowd disappeared, Jesus stoned the sinner to death, saying, ‘I too am a sinner. But if the law could only be executed by men without blemish, the law would be dead.’”

By doing this, the regime hopes to “control the Church and ultimately render it powerless and subservient to the communist system,” Asia Harvest added. “The government has openly announced plans to ‘reinterpret’ the Bible and other religious texts, so they will have ‘socialist characteristics.’”

This is an example of the recent persecution – just in China alone. Worldwide, last year, in 2020, some 260 million Christians faced persecution in some form or another for their faith, and out of that:

2,983 Christians were killed because their faith.

3,711 Christians were arrested, detained without trial, sentenced and imprisoned.

9,488 Christian churches or buildings were attacked or destroyed.

Again, that was just for 2020. Just like followers of Jesus in Peter's day, we still live in a troubled world that is hostile against those take the Word of God seriously and openly identify with Christ and live their lives for Him. And it should be no surprise that there is conflict between those who follow Christ and those who prescribe to the ways of this fallen sinful world. Jesus said in **John 15:18**,

If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.

Peter has already explained, Christians are a people who have been set apart by God, we are to be different from others, we are to stand on biblical principles and values instead of compromising with the world, we are to represent Christ and share the gospel to a lost and dying world, and as a result, we are going to “stick out” – or at least we should, and we may suffer through discrimination, and resentment, mistreatment, and maybe even persecution for identifying with Christ and living for Him.

I was reminded of two passages in the book of Acts as I studied this week. In **Acts 1:8**, Jesus told His disciples they would receive power from the Holy Spirit, and they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, in Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. Jesus then ascends to heaven but His followers remained in Jerusalem. Then in **Acts 8:1**, after Stephen was stoned to death for identifying with Christ and sharing the gospel message, a fire of persecution was sparked against the church in Jerusalem, and as a result, Christians scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria just as Jesus had said. Due to the persecution against the church and the scattering of believers who were likely running for their lives, the gospel scattered with them, it thrived, and it spread like wildfire.

As Joni Eareckson Tada has said as she commented on her own personal suffering, “*Sometimes God permits what He hates to achieve what He loves,*” in other words, God is not the source of evil or suffering – He hates it, but He may permit it or use it for His sovereign purposes and for our greater good.

Now before we move on, I will tell you that the subject of persecution is pretty foreign to Christians in America. We have not experienced the persecution like they did in Peter's day nor do we experience the current reality of so many believers in other parts of the world. We aren't tortured, we aren't put in prison or killed simply because we identify with Christ, so this kind of persecution is hard to personally relate to, but with that said, we still need to know how to respond while living in a troubled and hostile world. That's what we are going to explore this morning, so turn with me to **1 Peter 3**, beginning with **verses 13-14**.

¹³Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED,

Peter begins by asking kind of an odd question to his readers, "**Who is there to harm you**" when their likely answer would have been "*Well, just about everybody*" because if you remember, Peter is writing to churches in Asia Minor who are suffering and are being harmed under persecution by the Roman Empire. They were living in a hostile world, that was their current reality, so it's an odd question in light of their circumstances.

Now with that said, to expand his audience to include people like you and me in the here and now, there is the possibility that Christians may not suffer through persecution.

Explaining **verse 13** like a proverb – under normal circumstances when you serve your neighbors and your community, when you are helpful and generous and caring, when you do what is right and good – you should not expect harm to be directed your way. You should not anticipate hostilities, and for the vast majority of us that seems to hold true – that's how it tends to work out, but there is always that exception – there is always the possibility, there is always the potential that a Christian today might experience harm or intimidation – for no other reason than they lived according to God's Word and identified with Christ. It can absolutely happen, and Peter says if harm is directed your way, if others do try to intimidate you, if you do suffer for the sake of righteousness, if you do face persecution for the Lord's sake – then continue to do what is right and good.

Don't retaliate as we discussed last week, don't return evil for evil, don't return verbal abuse for verbal abuse, instead continue to do what is right and good. **And why would we do this?** Go back to Chapter **2:21-23**.

²¹ For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously;

We have been called for this purpose – that being to follow the example of Christ, to be conformed to the image of Christ, and as we live out this calling in a fallen and sinful and hostile world – we are **blessed**. We are blessed. **Didn't Jesus say the same thing?** In **Matthew 5:10-12**, in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said,

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We are blessed, we are heavenly favored, we are highly privileged, and we are in good company when we suffer for the sake of righteousness – for the Lord's sake, for His reputation, for His honor – for standing out in the crowd and doing what is right and good. We are blessed.

Peter continues and says, **and do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled** or in some translations “*do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.*” This part of the verse comes from **Isaiah 8:12** where the prophet speaks to the frightened people of Judah as the Assyrian army prepared to overrun the city of Jerusalem. Vastly outnumbered, the people of God were in dire straits, and it was only a matter of time until the Assyrians defeated them, so Isaiah's words must have seemed a bit crazy when he said,

“And you are not to fear what they fear or be in dread of it. “It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread.”

In other words, “*Don't fear the enemy you see coming against you. Yes, they are mighty, but you have something they don't. You have God on your side – so fear God rather than man.*” Don't be afraid, don't be intimidated, and don't give up for the Lord is with you, and it is He who should be your focus in the midst of your trouble. Peter then explains in **verses 15-16**.

¹⁵but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; ¹⁶and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

This is where the rubber really hits the road for me, and Peter tells us that in our suffering for doing what is right and good, we are to **sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts** meaning we are to recognize and settle in our hearts and our minds, once and for all, who is in control and who do we truly serve. **Who are we loyal to? Who do we belong to? Who are we committed to? Who is our Lord?** It's Christ, and when our lives are focused and centered on Him, then we are able to respond as we should to the hardships and the suffering that we all experience to some degree in this sinful and fallen and hostile world.

Then Peter says, **always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you**, in other words, and don't miss this – it will be evident – people will take notice of your hope in the midst of your trouble and suffering – and sooner or later they will ask you to explain why you have hope when it appears you have every reason not to be hopeful. **How can you have hope when the world seems to be against you? Why are you so hopeful when others around you are not?** And that brings up another question. If others watched you, would you give them any reason to ask, **“Why are you so hopeful?”**

*In his book “Good to Great,” Jim Collins told the true story of Admiral James Stockdale who was a prisoner of war, a POW during the Vietnam War. Stockdale spent some seven years in the “Hanoi Hilton,” which was a house of horrors where he was subject to severe torture many times by his captors because he would not cooperate with them. Collins noted, “It just seemed so bleak – the uncertainty of his fate, the brutality of his captors, and so forth...**how on earth did he deal with it...?”***

Years later in an interview, Collins asked that very question directly to Stockdale, and he replied, “I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

Stockdale was confident he would prevail. He was convinced how it would all work out in the end. He knew this wasn't the end of the story. That's hope.

Then Collins followed with another question: “**Who didn’t make it out?**”

“The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart....”

Then Stockdale said this, and it’s important. “You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

So, what’s he saying? You never give up hope, but at the same time you have to face your current reality. That’s what he is saying – it’s a paradox, in fact, it’s called the “Stockdale Paradox.”

You never give up hope, but you also have to be honest about your current circumstances – whatever they may be. We may face hardship, and difficulty, suffering and persecution – and that’s the brutal fact for all of us in this sinful and fallen and hostile world. Due to the sinful nature of all mankind, when sin entered the world, it opened the door and brought with it – pain and sickness, suffering, and sorrow, disease, hatred and war, and death. I could go on and on, but hopefully you understand the brutal fact of our current reality that touches us all.

We are not immune from it, and we can’t ignore it, but at the same time, we can have confidence, we can have faith, we can have hope that God will victoriously bring us through it. Like Admiral Stockdale, what we may be going through isn’t the end of the story – it’s simply the rough journey that leads us to Christ and our heavenly destination.

If you remember, Peter has already explained that this world is not our home. We are simply passing through it. We are strangers here – marching uphill toward our heavenly future and destination, and here is a brief description:

Behold the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; for the first things have passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4)

We can endure and persevere in the midst of our current reality, because we have hope in Christ, and we look forward – we look ahead to a future reality. That’s the ultimate hope, and this hope is especially noticeable when things seem utterly hopeless, and it’s puzzling to the lost who may ask for an explanation.

Peter says we must be ready to share why we are not like everyone else and why we have hope about our future reality, and when we do share it, we should do so with **gentleness** and **respect**. Remember, we are not trying to win an argument – rather we are trying to win a person, so we should be careful and kind with our words. And if a person does speak wrongly about us or comes against us, we are to live our lives in such a way, with a **good conscience**, that no one will believe them. No one will believe their accusations. Then Peter says in **verse 17**,

For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.

This verse is a summary of what Peter has been saying – suffering for doing what is right and good may be God’s will – even though none of us truly want to suffer. But if we must according to God’s plan and purpose, then let’s at least suffer for do the right thing, in the right way, for the right reason.

Russell Davis was a 10-year-old boy who knew a hope that went beyond this life. He had fought cancer for 4 very long years when he wrote this note to his best friend.

*Dear Brian, **how are you doing?** I’m alright in the hospital, but a little sleepy. I know that you worry about me some, but don’t worry too much. Also, if it will help you feel better, you can come see me if you have time. When I die, if I do soon, don’t worry, ‘cause I’ll be somewhere special in heaven. And sooner than I know it, you’ll be up in heaven with me, ‘cause a thousand years on earth is a minute in heaven. I know you’ll miss me when I’m gone, but just accept it like you did with your uncle. My mom will give you something of mine so you can remember me always. So, don’t worry too much. Love, Russell.*

Three days later, Russell asked for a sip of water and said, “I love you, Mom. I love you, Dad” and he went home to be with the Lord.

That is a picture of hope even when facing your current reality – for as difficult as it may be, you know it’s not the end of the story – in fact, it’s really just the beginning of eternity.

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