

Why Are You Persecuting Me?
A Christian Response to Hostility and Persecution

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Introduction

“Saul approved of his execution” (Acts 8:1). A Christian deacon named Stephen was stoned to death by an enraged mob, the first martyr to follow his Lord into death. As Stephen fell asleep in Jesus, a young Pharisee named Saul kept an approving watch over the execution—and over the cloaks of Stephen’s murderers. The death of just one person “belonging to the Way” was not enough to satisfy the zealous Pharisee. Saul, “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” requested letters of permission from the high priest to arrest any believers found in the synagogues of Damascus (Acts 9:1-2). As he approached Damascus, Saul was stopped abruptly and set on a very different path with a very different purpose. Surrounded by light from heaven, Saul fell to the ground before the One he would soon learn was the risen Christ Himself. The crucified and risen Lord asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The Lord did not ask, “Why are you persecuting my followers?” or “Why are you persecuting my Church?” The question was personal: “Why are you persecuting *me*?”

Encountering the risen Christ, Saul was first blinded and later baptized, his sight restored. Saul—better known as Paul—would carry the name of Christ “before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). With the death of Stephen, the persecution of the Church in Jerusalem began, and believers were scattered into the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria. Herod “laid violent hands” on those who belonged to the Church, murdering James the brother of John (Acts 12:1-2). Peter and the other apostles were repeatedly arrested and imprisoned and, according to tradition, all of them—with the possible exception of John—suffered martyrdom. Paul, too, would suffer for the sake of Jesus’ name—“imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death” (2 Cor. 11:23), and was most likely martyred in Rome at the command of the Emperor Nero.

In its early centuries the Church would enjoy periods of peace and suffer through waves of hostility, even as it continued to spread among the nations. Protesting the unjust hatred directed against Christians, the Church Father Tertullian (c.160-225 A.D.) wrote, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”¹ The truth of Tertullian’s comment has been proved time and again down through the centuries. The Church continues to grow, as does the hostility against it. According to the World Watch List published by Open Doors International, a charity that supports persecuted Christians, pressure against Christians increased worldwide in 2013.²

In a nation where hostility against the Church may take less intense forms—ridicule, accusations of ignorance or intolerance, threats to religious liberty—it is possible, in freedom, to *study* persecution and our response to it. In countries where the saints lose homes and families, where they are imprisoned and murdered, persecution can only be endured. Satan, the crafty serpent of Eden, is still devious enough to employ hostility in forms that will be most effective for the location and circumstances. Yet Christ, by His death and resurrection has conquered him and the ancient dragon awaits his final and complete destruction. Until that Day, we will suffer our enemy's great wrath, “because he knows that his time is short” (Rev. 12:12). Hostility and persecution will vary in intensity and duration. Yet whatever its form or time frame, hostility against the Church *will* be present until our Lord returns.

How do we, as members of the body of Christ, respond to the hostility and persecution directed against us? The following six session Bible study will examine that question. In the first session we will study the roots of persecution. The second session will examine our unexpected response of joy and forgiveness. The third, fourth, and fifth sessions will present responses of prayer and faithfulness, the proclamation of the Word, and the use of our rights as citizens. The final session will examine—in the light of the empty tomb—the cross of persecution and suffering as Martin Luther saw it, as an identifying mark of the Church.

The Lord Jesus, who endured the hostility of many Pharisees during His earthly ministry, chose an equally hostile Pharisee as His ambassador. Paul, who had once so zealously afflicted the Body of Christ, would eventually in his own flesh suffer “Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24). When the followers of Jesus Christ, the members of His Body, encounter persecution and hostility on account of their faith, it is Jesus Himself who is being persecuted. Yet the Lord Jesus has, by His crucifixion and resurrection, already endured and overcome persecution, hostility, and even death for the sake of His Body, the Church. For this reason He promises us, “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

¹ Tertullian, *Apology*, Chapter 50, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian in Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 55.

² The nations in which the level of persecution against Christians increased include Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Columbia, and Kazakhstan. Katherine Burgess, “Aiming for ‘Effective Anger’: The Top 50 Countries Where It’s Hardest to Be a Christian,” *Christianity Today*, posted January 8, 2014 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/channel/utilities/print.html?type=article&id=115162>. Communist governments have a long and violent history of opposition to the Church. Communist regimes among the top 50 persecuting nations today include North Korea, where Christians are sent to labor camps, and Vietnam and Laos, where Christians are viewed as “foreign agents” and pressured to renounce their faith. Islamic extremism has become the primary source of persecution in 36 of the top 50 countries on the World Watch List. <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/news/2920576/2920586/2925422>.

Session 1
“Why Are You Persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4)
The Roots of Hostility and Persecution

The terrorist group *Boko Haram* (the name means “Western education is sacrilege”) wants to establish Muslim Sharia law in Nigeria. The group has stated that it will kill all the Christians in the country.³

In the past decade, the Christian population of the city of Mosul in Iraq dropped from 35,000 to 3000; more recently these remaining Christians fled after ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria) militants took control of the city. In Iraq and Syria, ISIS militants demanded that Christians convert to Islam, pay a protection tax, leave, or face death.⁴

Gay activists disrupted services at a Michigan church, shouting slogans at churchgoers, distributing fliers and claiming that Jesus was homosexual. Another group demonstrated outside of the church, but left peacefully when asked.⁵

San Diego State University allows its officially recognized campus organizations to exclude students who disagree with the message advocated by the group, unless the groups are religious. According to this policy, a Christian group cannot require that its officers or members believe in the Christian faith. A Christian fraternity and sorority declined to agree to the nondiscrimination statement and their applications to become officially recognized student organizations were rejected.⁶

Why are you persecuting me? *In each of the examples above, how might that question be answered? What seems to be the underlying reason or motivation in each situation for the hostility shown toward the Christians in question? Do you think that hostility will grow worse in years to come? What might prevent hostility from increasing?*

Hostility against the Body of Christ may be expressed in abusive or threatening speech, in social or political opinions and actions, or in violence as opponents attempt to marginalize, dehumanize, and even destroy those who trust in Christ. But what are the origins of such hostility? The apostle Paul, arrested in the Jerusalem temple, was accused of defiling the temple and “teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place” (Acts 21:28). Speaking in his own defense, Paul described his conversion and the reasons behind his earlier hostility against the followers of the Way. He had been strictly educated according to the Law of Moses, being as equally “zealous for God” as a persecutor as his persecutors now were (Acts 22:3). Paul persecuted believers because of his own religious beliefs and his misplaced zeal for the Word of God.

In a sermon of 1530, Martin Luther (who, with his sixteenth century followers, experienced a great deal of hostility for the sake of Christ) also linked the cause of persecution with the Word, in this case not the misplaced religious zeal of the persecutors but the faith by which the persecuted cling to the Word. Luther wrote that “the cause of our suffering is the same as that for which all the saints have suffered from the beginning. Of course the whole world must bear witness that we are not suffering because of public scandal or vice, such as adultery, fornication, murder, etc. Rather we suffer because we hold to the Word

³ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, “The Global War on Christians in the Muslim World,” *The Daily Beast*, February 6, 2012, www.thedailybeast.com.

⁴ Ruth Moon, “Thousands Flee as Terrorists Take Over Iraq’s Christian Heartland,” *Christianity Today*, June 16, 2014, www.christianitytoday.com and <http://lcms.org/president/persecution>.

⁵ “Gay activists disrupt Sunday service at Michigan church,” *Catholic News Agency*, November 13, 2008.

⁶ Rob Kerby, “Are U. S. Colleges Hostile to Christian Students?” www.Beliefnet.com. This issue has moved beyond a single campus. See the articles concerning campus organizations at other universities at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/september/intervarsity-now-derecognized-in-california-state-universit.html> and <http://www.intervarsity.org/page/vanderbilt-university>.

of God, preach it, hear it, learn it, and practice it.”⁷ As Paul had come to see and share, the followers of the Way are rightly rooted in Christ and His Word. The hostility leveled against them has deep roots of its own.

A review of the hostility directed against Christ and His followers takes us back to a tree deeply rooted in the newly created soil of Eden. Satan, “the ancient serpent” and “deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12:9), successfully tempted Eve, and Adam with her, to despise the Word of God and so—they were led to believe—become wise through eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.⁸ They ate of the forbidden fruit, and instead of wisdom gained a terrible and intimate knowledge of evil, sin, guilt, and shame. The corrupting stain of sin was inherited by their children—by all of us. The hostility of Satan, who was intent on destroying the Word and work of God, bore early fruit in Cain, the firstborn son of Adam and Eve. Both of their sons offered sacrifices to God, but by faith Abel offered “a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain” (Heb. 11:4), and Cain became angry enough to kill his brother. The hatred and violence directed against the Word of God, against Jesus, the Word made flesh, and against those who cling to Him by faith has not ceased since those early days of the world. Generations upon generations later, the apostle John would see the results of the endless hostility against the Word as he glimpsed in heaven the souls of those who were martyred “for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God” (Rev. 20:4).

The martyrs knew, as do we, and Satan as well—although he puts no faith in it—that “man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3). The Word sent forth by the Father, the Word made flesh, accomplished the purpose for which He was sent (Is. 55:11). The Gospel Word, the good news of all that Jesus has done to win salvation for us, is a saving Word, the Word from the mouth of the Lord by which we live. The Gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). The powerful Word of the Gospel is a personal Word. Jesus told His disciples, “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). Jesus asked Paul, “Why are you persecuting *me*?” The hostile forces that reject the Word are arrayed not only against countless faithful witnesses, but also against the crucified and risen Son and the Father who sent Him. Still, Satan makes every attempt to snatch away the saving Word, as birds devour seed sown on a hardened path (Matt. 13:19). Those who thrust aside the Word judge themselves “unworthy of eternal life” (Acts 13:46). For this reason the ancient serpent does not want the life-giving Word to take root, or if it has, he seeks to uproot it and bring disaster, as he did in Eden.

Consider again the examples of persecution at the beginning of this lesson, or other situations of which you are aware. How does each reflect the hostility of Satan against the Word of God?

In his epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul examines Eden’s fall into sin as if under a microscope. Like a deadly virus escaping a laboratory, sin spreads its infection across the human race—with Christians and persecutors, believers and unbelievers alike, falling under God’s just condemnation (Rom. 2:1-2; Rom. 3:22-23). In his examination of sin, Paul discusses the unfaithfulness of all people toward their Creator, as they worship and serve “the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 1:25). Rebellion against the Creator manifests itself in “all manner of unrighteousness,” including sexual immorality, envy, murder, gossip, malice, and strife (see Rom. 1:26-32).

⁷ Martin Luther, Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering (1530), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 51, ed. and trans. John W. Doberstein (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 200.

⁸ Concerning the fall into sin, Luther wrote that Eve “let the Word go and kept thinking what a fine apple it was and that after all such a little thing was of no great importance. So she went her way. And when one lets the Word go, there can be no other result. But when we stay with the Word and hold on to it, we shall certainly have the experience of conquering and coming out of it fine.” *Luther’s Works* 51:205.

Read Romans 1:18-32. *What details of Paul's discussion reveal the roots of hostility and persecution against God, His Word, and His people? Why is it important to remember that the persecuted fall under condemnation for sin just as surely as those who are hostile to them?*

As the New Testament narrative begins, the hostility rooted in Eden bursts into full and poisonous flower, directed against Jesus, the Word made flesh, and against all who would come to walk in His light. In Jesus "was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). However terrible the darkness and evil, it has not, and cannot, overcome the Light: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5).

Read John 3:16-21. *What reasons does Jesus Himself give for the hostility against the light? Why do people love the darkness? **Read Mark 9:38-41.** How sharp is the dividing line between darkness and light? Are there "gray areas"?*

Jesus, the Light of the world, warned His disciples, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). A servant is not greater than his master and should not expect to be treated any better than the master (John 15:20; Matt. 10:24-25). The unbelieving world persecuted Jesus the Master; it will persecute His servants also. Of all of the promises of Jesus, this may be one that we would rather not hear. But as the experiences of the disciples would later show (Acts 5:41), there is joy to be found even in that promise.

The plans and purposes of God are beyond our knowledge and understanding, except as He chooses to reveal them to us in Holy Scripture. Even then we may not understand those purposes and can only cling to the Word. We are warned, as Jesus warned His disciples, of the hostility that will be directed against us as His followers. That very "advance warning" reminds us that even the powers of darkness arrayed against us are subject to the Light. The risen Lord Jesus revealed to the Christians in Smyrna that they were going to suffer persecution, but He told them not to be afraid. The devil would throw some of them into prison and "for ten days" they would have tribulation (Rev. 2:10). The Lord was well aware of what lay ahead for His people and He set limits to the suffering they would soon experience.

The Lord was well aware of what lay ahead for Him in His earthly ministry as well. Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets foretold the hostility that would be directed against the Word made flesh (see, for example, Psalm 2, Psalm 22, and Isaiah 53). The Scriptures mapped out His path to the cross in chilling and accurate detail. Jesus often told His disciples what to expect in those final days in Jerusalem (Matt. 16:21; Matt. 17:22-23; Matt. 20:18-19). All that was done to Jesus, the persecution, rejection, betrayal and crucifixion, was done "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).

*Briefly review events in the life of Jesus, from His birth to His crucifixion. Give examples of the hostility directed against Him. How was He persecuted? How was Satan, directly and indirectly, involved in the hostility against Jesus? **Read 1 Peter 2:18-25.** How did Jesus respond to the persecution directed against Him? For a short time, "the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53) eclipsed the Light. Yet what was the ultimate result of the persecution directed against Jesus? **Read Romans 8:16-17.** What is the ultimate result for those who suffer as servants of the Master?*

The book of Hebrews provides a catalog of saints, many of whom endured persecution. They were tortured, mocked, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, and killed with the sword. At the head of this parade of triumphant, persecuted servants, "of whom the world was not worthy," (Heb. 11:32-38) stands Jesus, their Master, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God" (Heb. 12:2). We are told to remember the hostility endured by Jesus, that we "may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Heb. 12:3). The same chapter of Hebrews goes on to reveal a deeper purpose behind the hostility we experience, although we may not always recognize, understand, or welcome it: "And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? 'My son, do not regard

lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons” (Heb. 12:5-7). Every branch of the true Vine that does bear fruit the Father prunes, “that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2).

As sons and daughters, saints and servants of the Master, we will suffer the world’s hostility. The ancient serpent from Eden is still determined to “make war” on all those “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 12:17). The darkness still seeks to overcome the Light. Luther, writing to console those who were persecuted, commented: “It is the nature of the divine word to be heartily received by a few, but to be persecuted ruthlessly by many.”⁹ Holy Scripture tells us, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Persecution, whatever its purpose or limits, is guaranteed. How should we respond?

Responsive Reading . . . Psalm 27

⁹ Martin Luther, A Letter of Consolation to All Who Suffer Persecution (1522), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 43, ed. Gustav K. Wiencke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 62.

Session 2
“My Power is Made Perfect in Weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9)
Responding in Joy and Forgiveness

“For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). The apostle Paul repeatedly asked the Lord to deliver him from a thorn in the flesh, “a messenger of Satan” sent to harass him and keep him from becoming conceited (2 Cor. 12:7). The nature of this “thorn” is not known, although scholars have suggested that it may refer to those who attacked and persecuted Paul or to a physical issue such as malaria, a speech impediment, or difficulties with his eyesight. Whatever the nature of the affliction, the Lord replied, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul responds in faith, concerning his weakness as well as the insults and persecutions he experienced: “I am content.” The Greek word for Paul’s response, *eudokeo*, is sometimes translated to mean something stronger than mere contentment. It is the Father’s response to His Son: “This is my beloved Son, with whom *I am well pleased*” (Matt. 3:17; see also Matt. 17:5).

Repeatedly imprisoned, whipped five times, beaten three times, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked and adrift at sea (2 Cor. 11:23-25), and Paul is pleased? He is not only pleased—he boasts about his weakness, because in weakness the power of Christ is made perfect, as it was in the humiliation and shame of the cross. Christ crucified is for us who believe “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). As we are pleased and take delight in Jesus’ cross and the salvation won for us there, we may be pleased—or at least content—with the crosses we bear for His sake, because in them God is at work and displaying His mighty power.

Read Acts 5:17-42. *What message must the apostles proclaim? What is Gamaliel’s advice, and how does the Jewish ruling council respond? Why do the apostles rejoice? The apostles were not “of the world,” but how might the world have expected them to respond?*

The apostles rejoiced at being counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. One of those apostles, Peter, would write in his first epistle that believers should not be surprised when a “fiery trial” came upon them. Instead they were to rejoice, Peter told them, “insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:13-14). However, believers should not suffer for the wrong reasons—“as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler” (1 Pet. 4:15). We must not become self-made martyrs or create situations for the purpose of attracting hostility, seeking for ourselves glory that rightly belongs to our Lord. As the writer to the Hebrews cautions, “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Heb. 12:4).

As Christians we are to go about the daily work to which God has called us; we are not to search out a cross to bear. In a sermon on John 18:2, Luther commented that Jesus did not try to flee the suffering that awaited him on the night he was betrayed, but went with His disciples to Gethsemane according to His usual custom. “[Christ] followed along to His death, and yet He did not seek out the cross for Himself. He took His ordinary path as He was accustomed to do. This is a teaching for everyone, that we should neither seek nor flee the cross.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *On the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ (1528-29/1557)*, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 69, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 149.

Consider the following contemporary examples:

The Westboro Baptist Church, known especially for its protests at military funerals, planned to protest at the 2014 Colorado State University graduation. The protesters believe that the graduating students of the current generation are “unique in their filthy manner of life; unique in the lies that pervade their every thought” and unique in their enabling of same-sex marriage.¹¹

In 2009, Dr. George Tiller, who performed late term abortions, was shot to death at his church in Wichita, Kansas. His killer, Scott Roeder, was sentenced to life in prison. Roeder defended his actions, stating that he had to obey God’s law to save babies and that God’s judgment against the United States would “sweep over this land like a prairie wind.” Roeder promised to “avenge every drop of innocent blood.”¹²

How have the individuals in the above news stories created crosses for themselves? Are they suffering dishonor for the name of Jesus? What impact do such events have on the world’s perception of Jesus, His Church, and His Word?

We are not called to run toward persecution; it may in fact be necessary at times to flee from it, as the early believers fled Jerusalem when persecution arose against the Church (Acts 8:1; Acts 11:19). As He sends His disciples out “as sheep in the midst of wolves” with the urgent message of the kingdom, Jesus warns them, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Matt. 10:16-23). In Antioch of Pisidia, when persecution rose up against them, Paul and Barnabas “shook off the dust from their feet” and moved on (Acts 13:51; see also Luke 10:10-12).

At other times, flight may not be desirable or possible. It may be necessary to stand and take up the cross in a particular place or situation. Paul wants to hear that the Christians in Philippi are “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (Phil. 1:27-30). Before Jesus warns of the necessity of flight He tells His sheep not to be anxious about their witness when facing the wolves: “For what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt. 10:19-20). Throughout His earthly ministry Jesus stood firm against the unbelieving Pharisees and others who opposed Him, yet at times it was necessary for Him to elude their hostile grasp because “His hour had not yet come” (John 7:30; see also John 10:39 and Luke 4:29-30). But when His hour came, He took up His cross and died for those who persecuted Him.

The circumstances and limits of persecution remain in God’s hands and are bound by His will. We pray that we will always stand firm and strive “side by side for the faith of the Gospel.” But for what reasons or in what circumstances might it become necessary to flee or avoid persecution instead of facing the hostility?

Jesus Christ has chosen us out of the world to be His own, and therefore, as He warned, the world will hate us (John 15:19). Still, we should not *try* to be hated or live in a hateful manner. The world should see in us the love that marks us as followers of Jesus: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Although they would in due time experience persecution

¹¹ Channel 9 News and the *Fort Collins Coloradoan*, April 16, 2014 at <http://www.9news.com/story/news/local/2014/04/16/westboro-baptist-church-to-protest-csu-graduation/7793793>.

¹² Roxanna Hegeman, “Scott Roeder Sentenced to Life in Prison,” *The Huffington Post*, April 2, 2010 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/01/scott-roeder-sentenced-to_n_522654.html.

and flee from it, the early believers in Jerusalem were not known for protest or murder. They joyfully shared their possessions with those in need, worshiped in the temple, continued in the apostolic teaching and the breaking of bread, and found favor “with all the people” (Acts 2:42-47). Overseers, or bishops, were to be “well thought of by outsiders” so that they would not fall into disgrace (1 Tim. 3:7). With the daily possibility of facing ridicule or shame, we are told, “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:17-18; see also Matt. 5:38-48).

There is a reputation at stake here, and it is not ours. We are sheep (in the midst of wolves) and our Shepherd leads us “in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Ps. 23:3). The apostles rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord (Acts 5:41; Phil. 2:9-10). As we follow in the paths of righteousness set out before us, we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:43-48), reflecting the perfect love of our heavenly Father. Loving our enemies means desiring, as our Father does, that they be forgiven and saved, for God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1Tim. 2:4). We must not be “overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21), as Jesus did, when on the day called Good Friday He overcame the evils of sin, death, and Satan. Jesus prayed for His persecutors, for those who crucified Him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Such forgiveness is admittedly one-sided. Those who nailed Jesus to the cross most likely did not repent of it and were not interested in His forgiveness. Even we, whose sins He bore in His body on that tree, were “still sinners” (Rom. 5:8) and “hostile to God” (Rom. 8:7) when Jesus died for us. Such forgiving love may be one-sided, but the Word does not return empty; it accomplishes its purpose. We, by God’s grace, have been brought to repentance and faith. The centurion and soldiers keeping watch would say of the Crucified One who had prayed for forgiveness for them, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matt. 27:54). Stephen, following the example of His Savior, prayed for his murderers, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60). In the case of a young Pharisee named Saul, we see one example of the way in which Stephen’s prayer was granted.

The world that hates us needs our witness and our prayers. In 1523, an Augustinian monk and pastor, Henry of Zütphen, was arrested in Antwerp for embracing the evangelical faith of the Reformation. He was freed and continued preaching in other cities, but two years later Henry was kidnapped and murdered by an angry, drunken mob. After Henry was martyred, Martin Luther wrote to the Christians in Bremen to console them at the death of their pastor. Brother Henry was with the Lord; it was his murderers who needed the prayers of the Bremen Christians: “His murderers have already been repaid enough and more than enough by staining their hands so terribly with innocent blood and heaping upon themselves such great and awful guilt in the sight of God. There is really far more reason to weep and lament for them than for the sainted Henry, and to pray that not only they, but the whole land of Dithmarschen, may be converted and come to the knowledge of the truth.”¹³ God could use even the evil deeds of Henry’s murderers “to strengthen his Word so that it wins more people than it otherwise would.”¹⁴

In the following examples of persecution in recent years, how might God work through these people to strengthen his Word? How have you witnessed the Word of God at work in other circumstances of persecution, perhaps even in your own life?

¹³ Martin Luther, *The Burning of Brother Henry (1525)*, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 32, ed. George W. Forell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 267. The first martyrs for the Reformation faith were also Augustinians from Antwerp, Henry Vos and John van den Esschen, who were burned in Brussels on July 1, 1523. Luther wrote a hymn, a folk ballad titled “A New Song Here Shall Be Begun,” to commemorate the faith and martyrdom of these two young men. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 211-216.

¹⁴ *Luther’s Works*, 32:271. Augustine, the fourth century Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote, “But let [the Church] bear in mind, that among her enemies lie hid those who are destined to be fellow-citizens, that she may not think it a fruitless labor to bear what they inflict as enemies until they become confessors of the faith.” Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1993), 38.

After the murder of five Amish girls in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in 2006, the Amish “verbally expressed their forgiveness to the memory of the killer. They refused to talk badly about him or degrade his character. The Amish also designated a portion of the fund that poured in from around the world for the Amish schoolgirls to the widow and the children of the shooter.”¹⁵

In a wave of anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal in India, churches were desecrated and destroyed, Christian homes were burned, and hundreds of Christians were tortured and murdered. Yet a man who had been part of a mob later said of the Christians, “They are still suffering. But they have no complaints and they are living happily . . . If Jesus could influence people’s lives to such an extent, I would prefer to be part of that faith.” Another man said, “I have seen the violence and their suffering. Yet they have not given up their faith. So I decided to embrace their faith.”¹⁶

When we face hostility for the sake of Jesus’ name, the wisdom of the world might tell us to simply “rise above it.” We may instead, in joyful imitation of our Lord, “stoop below it” as our Lord humbled Himself to become flesh and stooped down to shoulder the weight of the cross for our salvation. As Jesus did, we can love and forgive those who persecute us, praying that they too will “come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4).

Responsive Reading . . . Psalm 23

¹⁵ Kate Naseef, “How Can the Amish Forgive What Seems Unforgivable?” *USA Today*, October 1, 2007 at http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-10-01-amish_N.htm.

¹⁶ Anto Akkara, “Persecuted Indian Christians Evangelize...by Forgiving,” from the book, *Faith Goes Viral*, quoted at CatholicCulture.org, ed. Philip F. Lawler, December 12, 2013, at <http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=606>.

Session 3
“Earnest Prayer for Him Was Made to God” (Acts 12:5)
Responding in Prayer and Faithfulness

In August of 2013, Christian homes and businesses and 32 churches in Egypt were looted and burned. The following month, two suicide bombers struck the All Saints Anglican Church in Peshawar, Pakistan, leaving 85 people dead and 140 wounded. “Today around the world, over 200 million are suffering for their faith in Jesus Christ. Believers all around the world face violence, imprisonment, and even death because of their faith in Christ. More than ever, Christians who suffer need our prayers.”¹⁷ In March of 2014, gunmen attacked a church in Mombasa, Kenya, killing six people and wounding other worshipers. A Lutheran bishop in Kenya writes, “It is imperative that we pray and support each other, especially those who are being persecuted.”¹⁸ The organization Open Doors International, which provides support and encouragement to persecuted believers worldwide, began the “International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church,” a day usually observed near All Saints’ Day in November. Such prayers, of course, cannot be limited to a single day. Wherever and whenever the saints, the members of Christ’s Body, face persecution, they pray—and other members of the Body pray for them.¹⁹

Old and New Testament believers alike faced persecution with prayer and faithful witness as they suffered reproach for the sake of Christ (Heb. 11:26). Suffering illness and loss at the hand of Satan (who was, in turn, restrained by the hand of God), faithful Job “fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said . . . ‘The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD’” (Job 1:20-21). Upon learning that an edict had been signed forbidding prayer to any “god” other than King Darius, the exiled Israelite Daniel followed his usual custom: “He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously” (Dan. 6:10). In Gethsemane on the night He was betrayed, the Lord Jesus prayed in agony that His Father’s will be done, His sweat “like great drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44). After the apostle James was martyred, Peter was imprisoned and “earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (Acts 12:5).

Consider the above biblical examples. What is the content of the prayers of our Lord Jesus and the saints as they face persecution? Do you see any similarities in their prayers? Why is prayer so important as God’s people face hostility and persecution?

Jesus, “the faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5), that is, the faithful martyr, taught us to pray.²⁰ In the prayer that we call His own, Jesus sets out the treasured words that provide a pattern for all of our prayers, including our prayers under persecution.²¹ “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). In this prayer, we do not call out to “My Father,” but to “Our Father.” As we pray these petitions in the face of hostility we remember that we are united in one Body with our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world, with the martyred saints who rest from their labors, and with our Lord Jesus. We are children of one Father, “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17).

¹⁷ Matthew Block, “A Year of Martyrs: Praying for the Persecuted Church,” *The Canadian Lutheran* (September/October 2013), 20.

¹⁸ Joseph Omolo, “Under Attack in Kenya,” *The Lutheran Witness* (June/July 2014), 5.

¹⁹ Resources concerning prayers for the persecuted Church are available at <http://blogs.lcms.org/2014/statement-on-persecution> and <http://blogs.lcms.org/2014/statement-on-christian-persecution-in-iraq>.

²⁰ Our English word *martyr* comes from the Greek word for witness. In the early centuries of the Church (as in many parts of the world today), to be a witness for Christ may well have meant becoming a martyr for Him.

²¹ See the 2011 LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations document, *Theology and Practice of Prayer: A Lutheran View*, especially the discussion of the Lord’s Prayer on pages 44-61. The document is available at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1745>.

“Hallowed be your name” (Matt. 6:9). The people of Israel suffered in exile, enduring the discipline of the Lord because of their faithless idolatry. With Jerusalem in ruins, the psalmist prays, “Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name’s sake!” (Ps. 79:9) When God set out to save His people and return them to their land, He told them, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations” (Ezek. 36:22). In saving His people God would vindicate, that is, prove or confirm, the holiness of His great name (Ezek. 36:23). Suffering the hostility of His enemies for the sake of our salvation, Jesus embodied the words of the prayer He taught us as He vindicated the holiness of His Father’s name: “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (John 17:1-4). We pray that those who must bear the cross will hallow our Father’s name, remaining faithful to Him and obedient to the Word.

“Your kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10). Jesus is the one in whom the kingdom comes. We live within the kingdom now, because wherever the King is, there we find the kingdom (Matt. 18:20; Luke 17:21). However, on a day yet to come, we will know and enjoy the kingdom in its fullness and glory. The King promises, “Surely I am coming soon,” to which the suffering saints reply, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20). The citizens of the kingdom endure persecution for the sake of the King, but we may not take revenge. That is to be left in the Lord’s hands and the persecuted Church prays for that day of divine justice to come: “How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!” (Ps. 74:10-11) Even the saints already at rest in the presence of the Lamb, those “who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” long for the day of judgment and justice: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:9-10). The kingdom is both “now” and “not yet” and so, entrusting themselves “to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23), the persecuted saints still pray, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

Read Revelation 19:11-16. *Jesus, the Word made flesh, endured the shame and humiliation of the cross, but here He is portrayed in majesty as King of kings and Lord of lords. What comfort in persecution is found in these verses? For what should we pray?*

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Explaining this petition of the Lord’s Prayer, Martin Luther writes,

Therefore we who are Christians must surely expect to have the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies and must expect that they will inflict every possible misfortune and grief upon us. For where God’s Word is preached, accepted, or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind

Therefore, there is just as much need here as in every other case to ask without ceasing: “Dear Father, your will be done and not the will of the devil or of our enemies, nor of those who would persecute and suppress your holy Word or prevent your kingdom from coming; and grant that we may bear patiently and overcome whatever we must suffer on its account, so that our poor flesh may not yield or fall away through weakness or sloth.”²²

To pray that God’s will be done is not a prayer of doubt or cringing resignation. As in the case of faithful Job (Job 1:12; Job 2:6) and the imprisoned Christians of Smyrna (Rev. 2:10), the forces of evil arrayed

²² Martin Luther, Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 448-449.66-67.

against us are subject to the will of God. To ask that God's will be done is to see His will as a fortress, a wall, against which Satan, his evil angels, and his earthly forces "shall dash themselves to pieces."²³

We also pray on behalf of the persecuted Church, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). Christians throughout the world, even if they do not lose their lives, may see their homes, businesses, livelihoods, and reputations destroyed. We can support them, whenever possible, in their physical needs. We pray that their families would be defended, that homes and work be protected or restored, and that they with all the saints might continue to feed—in His holy Supper and by faith through the study of His Word—on Jesus "the bread of life" (John 6:35).²⁴

As prayers of the persecuted Church, the next two petitions may be linked. We ask our Father to "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" and then pray, "And lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 6:12-13). In the same sermon in which he teaches us to pray, Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matt. 5:44). The temptation to hate or seek revenge against those who hurt us may all too easily turn us away from the Word. In times of persecution, as at all times, we must repent of our loveless thoughts, words, and actions. We must repent if we have sought out of pride to construct a cross for ourselves or if we have earned the hostility of the world through behavior that does not reflect the love of Jesus Christ, who forgave those who crucified Him.

Finally, we pray, "Deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13). Surely every saint enduring the hostility of Satan and the world has uttered this petition. With the psalmist we cry out:

"In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me!" (Ps. 31:1) Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39). It was the Father's will that the Son should not be delivered but drink the cup of suffering. In His righteousness God has delivered us—deliverance that took place by way of the cross. It may be that our deliverance, the deliverance of the persecuted saints, may also take place through a cross. The Lord who taught us to pray also taught us, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25).

*Which petition of the Lord's Prayer most clearly describes for you a Christian response to hostility and persecution? **Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 26-27 and Hebrews 13:3.** Why is it important to recall that our Lord teaches us to pray in plural—for us, for our needs, and not just for individual needs?*

The apostles were arrested in Jerusalem because they had "greatly annoyed" the Jewish religious leaders by proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus and healing a man in Jesus' name. In this early instance of persecution, the apostles were ordered not to speak of Jesus, further threatened, and released. The apostles immediately gathered with the other believers for prayer. They hallowed God's name, calling on the "Sovereign Lord," the Creator. They acknowledged that His will had been done on earth when Jesus' enemies—Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel—acted against Him, doing whatever God's hand and plan "had predestined to take place." Then, in the face of continuing threats from those same enemies, the believers asked that they might speak His Word with boldness (Acts 4:23-31). Responding to hostility they asked for courage to faithfully proclaim the Word of the Gospel, and that is what they continued to do.

²³ Luther, Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, 449.69.

²⁴ "So there is a twofold eating of Christ's flesh. First, there is a spiritual kind of eating, which Christ treats above all in John 6 [:35-58]. This occurs in no other way than with the Spirit and faith in the proclamation of and meditation on the gospel, as well as in the Supper." Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VII, *The Book of Concord*, 604:61.

God is glorified in the faithfulness of His saints, as Jesus glorified His Father by accomplishing all He was sent to do. Jesus stood in the place of sinners and did what Adam and Eve failed to do, what we so often fail to do. He remained faithful to the Word, obedient to His Father even to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). Jesus, the faithful witness, stood before His persecutor Pontius Pilate and “made the good confession.” In the same way, the young pastor Timothy would also confess his faith “in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim. 6:12-16). Paul encouraged Timothy, reminding him not to be ashamed but to “share in suffering for the Gospel” (2 Tim. 1:8). In the face of suffering, Timothy is to “follow the pattern of sound words” that he learned from Paul and to “guard the good deposit” entrusted to him (2 Tim. 1:13-14). Paul, himself suffering and bound in chains, endures everything in order that the elect saints may be saved. He seriously warns Timothy, and us, to remain faithful to our faithful Lord: “If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:11-13).

Persecution and hostility will come, and circumstances will grow worse in these last days. Paul warns that “evil people and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” In the face of increasing evil, how do we respond? Paul gives Timothy the answer: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed . . . how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:13-15).

Read 2 Timothy 3:10-17. Persecutors often target the leadership of the Church. What is especially damaging about such an attack? How, unknown to the persecutors, might such an attack strengthen the Church? How will the study of the Word encourage us to be faithful and strengthen us in the face of hostility?

Facing certain death, the Old Testament saints Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego testified to God's power to save. Even if He should choose not to save them, they would remain faithful to Him. Joined in the fiery furnace by one like “a son of the gods” and saved, the faithful witness of the three young men bore fruit as the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar blessed the God of Israel (Dan. 3:8-30). We, too, must continue in what we have learned and firmly believed, confident that the Son of God has delivered us by His death and resurrection and that He stands with us as we endure the fires of hostility. At our Baptism, Christ made us His own and Satan declared war against us, the beginning of a lifelong battle. In Confirmation we acknowledge the gifts of God received in our Baptism, promising to “renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways” and to remain steadfast in the confession of our Christian faith and in the Church, willing “to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it.” No hostility or persecution, not even death, can separate us from the love of Christ or from His promise: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

Read together the following responses from the Confirmation service of the Lutheran Service Book.²⁵ Confirmands promise to renounce the devil and his works and ways. They confess the Apostles' Creed and their belief that Scripture is the inspired Word of God, also affirming the truth and faithfulness of the doctrine of the Lutheran Church. Those promises are followed by the three responses below. How are these promises especially meaningful in the face of hostility and persecution?

²⁵ *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 272-273.

P: Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord's Supper faithfully?

R: *I do, by the grace of God.*

P: Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?

R: *I do, by the grace of God.*

P: Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?

R: *I do, by the grace of God.*

Responsive Reading . . . Psalm 2

Session 4:
“To Speak Your Word with All Boldness” (Acts 4:29)
Responding with the Proclamation of the Word

Abdi Noor (not his real name), converted to Christianity from Islam. He heard the Gospel on a radio program and later worked with Lutheran Hour Ministries in Nairobi. After Abdi was repeatedly attacked and beaten because of his conversion, Christian friends suggested that he go into hiding. Abdi replied, “Now that I know the truth . . . Now that I know how much God loves them . . . Now that I know what a lie my people have believed . . . Now that I can see, I cannot keep quiet! . . . I will not miss an opportunity to share the marvelous news that a person can have a relationship with God Himself through Christ.”²⁶

After the disciples were arrested and released, they met with other believers to pray. They asked that the Lord would “grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness” and prayed that the Lord would confirm His Word with signs and wonders. Their prayer was heard, the place where they met was shaken, and “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:29-31). Persecution continued against the Church and the apostles were arrested again. An angel released them and commanded them, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life” (Acts 5:20). They did so, and were arrested again, although the officers acted more cautiously this time. The perplexed authorities were angry because the disciples were proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus. Ordered again to stop preaching the good news, the disciples responded: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). They must obey the Lord who, before His ascension, had commissioned them: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

After Jesus’ ascension, the apostles chose a man to take Judas’ place. According to the job description, the person had to be someone who accompanied the others during Jesus’ earthly ministry, from His baptism to His ascension, because the new apostle would also be a witness to His resurrection (Acts 1:21-26). The apostles were Jesus’ witnesses, His martyrs.²⁷ It is what martyrs do, it is who they are. It is who we are—witnesses. We have not yet physically seen the risen Lord, but we among those blessed people “who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). We are witnesses who have seen the risen Savior through the witness of the Word.

Read Matthew 28:16-20 and Luke 24:45-48. *What is the content, the heart and center, of the proclamation that must be continued, even in the face of hostility? What are the similarities and differences between Jesus’ words in these passages from Matthew and Luke? As we remain faithful in our proclamation, what particular aspects of these words might provoke hostility against the Word?*

The roots of hostility against the Word stretch back to Eden, but of course the Word of the Gospel was heard even then. Adam and Eve were assured that the offspring of the woman would bruise the head of the hostile serpent (Gen. 3:15). When the time came for the promise to be fulfilled, “God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal. 4:4-5). The woman’s offspring, the innocent Lamb of sacrifice, was “foreknown before the foundation of the world” and was made known in these last times for our sake (1 Pet. 1:20). We, too, were chosen in Christ “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), chosen and made holy for a holy purpose.

Read 1 Peter 2:4-12. *What is said in these verses about hostility toward the Word? What is said about the plans and purposes of God? Who are we and what is our purpose? What kind of behavior supports our witness?*

²⁶ John Maina, “Beaten for Jesus,” *The Canadian Lutheran* (September/October 2013), 7.

²⁷ The English word martyr, as noted earlier, comes from the Greek word for witness.

We are called to proclaim the mighty acts of God who called us out of darkness into His light. It is not always a welcome proclamation. In prayer to His Father, Jesus said of His disciples, “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:14). Faithful proclamation of the Word *will* bear fruit, but as we know, it will also provoke the hostility of the world and of Satan, who cannot tolerate the Word. Commenting on the fall into sin, Martin Luther said, “Note, then, the strategy of the devil in attacking only faith. He does not assail the heathen, unbelievers, and non-Christians. These stick to him like scales. But he sees that he cannot get at those who have God’s Word, faith, and the Spirit. . . . [The devil] must attack the matter in a different way and take the chief possession. If he has brought a man to doubt whether it really is the Word of God, then he has won the game.”²⁸

Speaking to His disciples of Satan’s hostility against them, Jesus told them, “What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.” He immediately added a warning about the enemy: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:27-28). We fear the enemy, but we know the enemy fears the Gospel Word. He will make martyrs out of witnesses wherever and whenever he can. But the Father who cares for sparrows values His beloved witnesses much more. Jesus followed with a promise and a warning concerning the eternally serious nature of our witness: “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33).

Faithful witness to the Word, in times of peace or persecution, is not optional. This responsibility to be faithful witnesses even in times of persecution may seem like a burden heavier than the persecution itself. How can we know if we will have the strength to faithfully present our witness? Anticipating both our fear and our need, Jesus gives us His promise: “When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Matt. 10:19-20).

Proclamation may provoke persecution, yet the circumstances of persecution may at the same time present opportunities for faithful proclamation. When Stephen was arrested and brought before the Jewish ruling council, he used the opportunity to review for his opponents the acts of God in Israel’s history and to speak of the coming of Jesus, “the Righteous One,” who had also suffered at their hands (Acts 7:1-53). After Stephen was martyred, many believers left Jerusalem and “those who were scattered went about preaching the Word” (Acts 8:4). Philip was among those scattered into the world with the Word. He brought the Gospel to Samaria and told an Ethiopian eunuch the good news of Jesus. Stoned and left for dead in Lystra, Paul rose up and continued to preach the Gospel. He encouraged the believers to continue in the faith, “saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Who should know better about those tribulations than Paul? In Philippi, Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned. From their prison cell they proclaimed the Word, “praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25). The proclamation of the Word takes place in many ways. Prayers and hymns count!²⁹ When an earthquake freed his prisoners, the frightened jailer asked

²⁸ Martin Luther, Sermon on Genesis 3:1-6 (1523), ed. Edwald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1491.

²⁹ Concerning hymn writing, Martin Luther commented that Paul “exhorted the Colossians to sing spiritual songs and Psalms heartily unto the Lord, so that God’s Word and Christian doctrine might be instilled and implanted in many ways.” Martin Luther, Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal (1524), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 316. Hymns may help sustain faith during times of persecution. A sixteenth century Lutheran pastor wrote that a time will come when there is “no pure public preaching, and the Gospel will be preserved only in the houses, by pious Christian fathers. These will find the hymns of Luther to be of great service and benefit . . . God grant his blessing and grace, that they may use them well for admonition,

how he might be saved and was told to believe in the Lord Jesus. The seed of the Word was planted and bore fruit. The jailer and his household believed and were baptized.

Many psalms express the suffering of God's people in the face of persecution. Consider the words of psalms, hymns, and other Christian songs. How is the Gospel message presented? How and when might such psalms, songs, and hymns be a useful witness?

In Athens, Paul's proclamation took a different form as he sought to gain a hearing with a crowd that was not necessarily hostile but somewhat skeptical. Some were interested; others called him a "babbling." Provoked by the many idols he saw in the city, Paul spoke of the Gospel in the synagogue and the marketplace. He introduced the Athenians to the true God, the God they worshiped as unknown. He proclaimed repentance, judgment, and resurrection. Once again the Word bore fruit. Some of Paul's hearers mocked him, but others said, "We will hear you again about this," and some of them believed (Acts 17:16-34). Falsely accused and arrested in Jerusalem, Paul quieted the enraged mob and told them how he met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 21:27 to 22:21).

As a prisoner Paul would eventually carry the name of Jesus before governors, kings, and even Caesar. The Lord stood by His apostle and strengthened him so that through him "the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it" (2 Tim. 4:17). As we hear the last report of Paul's whereabouts in Scripture, he is preaching the Word. Under house arrest in Rome and facing trial before Caesar, Paul is "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31).

As witnesses we are always on call. The apostle Peter tells us not to fear those who wish to harm us. We must always be prepared to present our case to anyone who might ask about the hope that is ours in Christ. We are, however, to do this "with gentleness and respect" and with a good conscience (1 Pet. 3:15-16). Good behavior and charitable deeds in and of themselves are not a proclamation of the Gospel message, but such actions support our witness and gain a hearing for the Word. The mercy of Christ Jesus takes on flesh in the mercy that we show to those who hear the good news. James challenges us, "Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18). We are even told to feed a hungry enemy and give drink to a thirsty foe. In so doing, we will "heap burning coals on his head" and overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:20-21).

*Discuss circumstances in which charitable works might support the proclamation of the Gospel. **Read Acts 3.** How might works of mercy gain a hearing for the Word and allow suffering people to hear the Gospel?*

Our response to hostility includes the proclamation of the Word, but it is not an excuse to begin constructing our own crosses. The apostle Peter comments, "For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil" (1 Peter 3:17). In this we follow Jesus Christ, the faithful witness. Innocent of all sin, He suffered for us, "the righteous for the unrighteous." Enduring and overcoming all hostility, He Himself did what He would then command of us. Jesus, risen from the dead, "went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison," declaring His triumph over the ancient enemy who wars against the Word (1 Pet. 3:19). Baptized into Christ, we follow our Lord through death into life (Rom. 6:3-4), proclaiming the good news of His victory to people still imprisoned in the darkness of sin.

*We are more than conquerors! **Read Romans 8:31-39.** Which of these verses speak directly to our response to persecution and hostility? Which verses speak of our proclamation? Which speak of victory, comfort, or hope?*

instruction, and comfort." Christopher Boyd Brown, *Singing the Gospel: Lutheran Hymns and the Success of the Reformation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 171.

Commenting on John 15, Martin Luther writes that God permits the devil and the world to hound “every Christian on His vine” with external and internal persecutions. In this way, God “purifies and trims the branches, to make them stronger and better. All this is done that they may bear more fruit; that their faith may assert itself more and more and, by reason of trials, may become sure and strong; that they may praise God all the more, pray, preach, and confess. Then the Word and its power will increase everywhere. This applies both to the believers, who themselves become stronger in faith and in knowledge and to many others, who are to be brought to faith by them.”³⁰

Jesus, the true Vine, tells us, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:7-8). Abiding in the Word, we ask the Lord to defend us against the persecution of Satan and the world. We must also pray that we will faithfully proclaim the Word in the face of hostility and that the seed of the Word will bear fruit: “Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish and guard you against the evil one” (2 Thess. 3:1-3).

Responsive Reading . . . Psalm 71

³⁰ Martin Luther, Commentary on John 15:2, *Luther's Works*, vol. 24, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 209.

Session 5:
“Is It Lawful?” (Acts 22:25)
Responding According to Our Rights as Citizens

In a letter addressed to the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense, retired military chaplains wrote: “Put most simply, if the government normalizes homosexual behavior in the armed forces, many (if not most) chaplains will confront a profoundly difficult moral choice: whether they are to obey God or to obey men. This forced choice must be faced, since orthodox Christianity—which represents a significant percentage of religious belief in the armed forces—does not affirm homosexual behavior.”³¹

“The annual report released by the Oregon Public Health Division indicates 71 Oregonians died in 2013 after obtaining lethal medication to end their lives . . . The total known assisted suicides in Oregon stands at 752 deaths.”³²

“A report released by the Charlotte Lozier Institute finds that the United States is one of only seven countries in the world to allow abortion past 20 weeks.” The other countries permitting elective abortions after 20 weeks are Canada, China, North Korea, the Netherlands, Singapore and Vietnam.³³

In *Marriage and Religious Freedom: Fundamental Goods That Stand or Fall Together, An Open Letter from Religious Leaders in the United States to All Americans*, the authors state that “the most urgent peril is this: forcing or pressuring both individuals and religious organizations—throughout their operations, well beyond religious ceremonies—to treat same-sex sexual conduct as the moral equivalent of marital sexual conduct. There is no doubt that the many people and groups whose moral and religious convictions forbid same-sex sexual conduct will resist the compulsion of the law, and church-state conflicts will result.”³⁴

How are moral issues such as those described above evidence of hostility against the Word? How might circumstances such as the above indicate rising hostility? How are such issues a threat to religious liberty?

According to a report by Open Doors International, the rapid rise of religious persecution in the Central African Republic in 2013 illustrates the overall increase of persecution in “failed states,” which Open Doors defines as weak states “where social and political structures have collapsed to the point where government has little or no control.” An officer with Open Doors comments that the report shows “the

³¹ Letter of April 28, 2010, 1-2. Chaplains of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod were among those who signed this letter. The chaplains’ letter does not imply that the matter of same-sex relationships is itself a difficult moral question—Scripture’s condemnation is explicit. The “difficult moral choice” indicated is that of determining the particular instances in which obedience to God requires disobedience to human authorities. The chaplains’ letter is available at <http://oldsite.alliancedefensefund.org/userdocs/DADTLetter.pdf>.

³² *Life News* (March 2014), <http://www.lutheransforlife.org/media/life-news/>. Media coverage of the decision of brain cancer patient Brittany Maynard to end her own life (on November 1, 2014) brought national attention to the topic of assisted suicide. LCMS Director of Life and Health Ministries Maggie Karner, also suffering from brain cancer, brought a personal message of life and hope to the debate. See video commentary by Brittany and Maggie at <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/03/us/brittany-maynard-suicide-fofo>.

³³ *Life News* (April 2014), <http://www.lutheransforlife.org/media/life-news/>.

³⁴ *Marriage and Religious Freedom: Fundamental Goods That Stand or Fall Together, An Open Letter from Religious Leaders in the United States to All Americans* (January 12, 2012), 1. President Matthew Harrison of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was one of the religious leaders who signed this letter. The letter is available at <http://lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=726&DocID=1620>.

importance of a stable state as a guardian of religious liberty.”³⁵ Whatever political views might be evoked by that statement, a stable government may—at least in comparison with a failed state—provide a measure of freedom from persecution. Even the most stable government, however, is not a guarantee of religious freedom. The Lord Jesus, the apostles, and the earliest Christians lived in first century Palestine, a conquered territory occupied by the forces of the Roman Empire. Proud of its enforced “peace,” the empire might have considered itself a stable state and, during the early centuries of the Church, Christians did enjoy periods of peace within the Roman Empire. Yet living under the “peace of Rome” they also endured waves of persecution at the hands of citizens or government officials.

At creation God commanded the people He made to subdue the earth and have dominion over it (Gen. 1:28). He put His creation in their hands to keep and manage—and to govern: “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man” (Ps. 115:16). With the fall into sin, that management became subject to corruption and selfish ambition. While human dominion may often be exercised with justice and mercy in governments that enjoy varying levels of stability, states will always fail. All earthly governments, stable or failed, owe their existence and authority to God. The apostles Peter and Paul most likely suffered martyrdom under Nero, an emperor known for his personal instability. Yet believers owed to the emperor, for the Lord’s sake, honor and obedience. Paul wrote, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment” (Rom. 13:1-2). Peter said, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good . . . Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Pet. 2:13-14, 17).

Read Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. What details do these passages reveal about governments and their authority? How might these verses help us in responding to persecution and hostility against the Church?

Whatever illusions they may have about the source of their own power, even unbelieving rulers receive their authority from the hand of God. Christian and pagan kings alike are subject to the King of kings. King Darius the Mede, distressed because his faithful servant Daniel was condemned to death by the king’s own decree, “labored till the sun went down to rescue him” (Dan. 6:14). Darius spent the night fasting, no doubt hoping that the lions in the den with Daniel were doing the same. Impressed with the God who saved Daniel, Darius commanded his people “to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel” (Dan. 6:26). God called the Persian king Cyrus “my shepherd,” the one who “shall fulfill all my purpose” (Is. 44:28) and says of him, “I equip you, though you do not know me” (Is. 45:5). Under God’s direction, Cyrus permitted the exiled Israelites to return to their land and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. When the fullness of time had come, a decree of Caesar Augustus was instrumental in the fulfillment of the prophecy that from Bethlehem would come forth the “ruler of Israel” (Micah 5:2). The Lord told the apostle Paul, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome” (Acts 23:11). Then, directing the efforts of various Roman tribunes, governors, centurions, and the Roman legal system, God brought Paul safely to Rome, where His apostle and ambassador would testify before Caesar.

Stable governments, as opposed to failed states, often grant basic rights to their citizens, including the freedom of worship. As Christian citizens, we may make use of these rights—wherever and whenever we have them—to demonstrate love for our neighbor and extend the kingdom of God through the proclamation of the Gospel. The apostle Paul, although a Jew, was born a citizen of the Roman Empire.

³⁵ Katherine Burgess, “Aiming for ‘Effective Anger’: The Top 50 Countries Where It’s Hardest to Be a Christian,” *Christianity Today*, January 8, 2014, at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/january/50-countries-where-hardest-to-be-christian-world-watch-list.html?paging=off> .

On a number of occasions the apostle employed his citizenship rights in the service of Christ and the Gospel—and to his own advantage. Unjustly beaten and imprisoned in Philippi, Paul and Silas refused to depart quietly when the magistrates decided to let them go. Paul responded: “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out” (Acts 16:37). The frightened authorities apologized and released the two missionaries, a small victory that may well have encouraged the local believers.

Arrested in Jerusalem, Paul used his citizenship rights to escape a flogging and, in the process, thoroughly frighten a Roman tribune. Tied up to be beaten, Paul asked, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” (Acts 22:25) It was not lawful, and Paul, although still a prisoner, was treated with greater respect and received frequent opportunities to speak in his own defense and in defense of the Gospel. Finally, Paul appealed to Caesar, and the Roman governor Festus replied, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go” (Acts 25:10-12). Paul’s citizenship rights extended only so far, and in Rome he was “an ambassador in chains” (Eph. 6:20). Still, he was able to describe the way in which even his chains served the cause of Christ: “I want you to know brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” (Phil. 1:12-13).

When and where we enjoy the liberty provided by a stable government, we may, like Paul, employ our rights as citizens in the cause of the Gospel, in public proclamation, private witness, and service to our neighbor. Martin Luther wrote:

Since a true Christian lives and labors on earth not for himself alone but for his neighbor, he does by the very nature of his spirit even what he himself has no need of, but is needful and useful to his neighbor. Because the sword is most beneficial and necessary for the whole world in order to preserve peace, punish sin, and restrain the wicked, the Christian submits most willingly to the rule of the sword, pays his taxes, honors those in authority, serves, helps, and does all he can to assist the governing authority, that it may continue to function and be held in honor and fear. Although he has no need of these things for himself—to him they are not essential—nevertheless, he concerns himself about what is serviceable and of benefit to others, as Paul teaches in Ephesians 5 [21-6:9].³⁶

God told the exiled Israelites, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). We, too, as citizens should seek the welfare of the “city” in which the Lord has placed us, through prayer, in public speech or political activity where appropriate, and as our faith finds expression in discussing our opinions and ideas. We have freedom of speech, assembly, and religion. We may vote, petition for new legislation or protest existing legislation, serve on juries or in public office, and seek help and protection through the legal system. As individual citizens, Christians “help to shape the content and activity of the ‘market place.’ That is to say, they make known their own views in community discussion and activity with a view to influencing public opinion in such a way as to reflect a concern for the application of moral principle to political issues. They do so on the conviction that only where the political climate is infused with ethical standards can justice and freedom be preserved and extended.”³⁷

Read 1 Timothy 2:1-4. How can the stability of the state (those “in high positions”) help advance God’s intention that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth? How might you be able to use

³⁶ Martin Luther, Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed (1523), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 94.

³⁷ *Guidelines for Crucial Issues in Christian Citizenship*, Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1968), 4.

your citizenship rights in service to your neighbor? How, for example, might the legal or political systems be used for the benefit of others? When do you have opportunities to influence “public opinion,” whether publicly or privately? Is there a line to be drawn between your faith and witness for Christ and your particular political views and, if so, where do you draw that line? What should we ask in prayer on behalf of our government?

Individuals often give public expression to their opinions. At certain times the church as an organization may choose to speak publicly on issues of particular importance that are addressed in God’s Word. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has chosen to speak “regarding issues that it deemed to be of critical importance for the church’s life and work, its witness, or its own moral responsibility (as *church*) to seek and promote the welfare of the state and its citizens”³⁸ The Synod has spoken against racial discrimination and abortion, supported the traditional definition of marriage, and addressed issues of immigration and religious liberty.³⁹

Even the most stable state may at some point, while not becoming a failed state, lose some of its stability or perhaps fail to defend the religious liberty of its people. A Christian may be called upon, in good conscience, to disobey laws that violate the command of God, as the disciples did when forbidden to preach in the name of Christ (Acts 5:29). Such “civic disobedience consists of violating a specific law in the interest of justice and freedom, particularly as these relate to the needs of others. Such disobedience is a responsible expression of citizenship when it is undertaken after all other means of obtaining justice have been exhausted and in full awareness of the demonic and disruptive forces present in any given social order.”⁴⁰ Hostility and persecution may follow a decision of civic disobedience. Christians who choose to obey the command of God rather than a civil law must be willing “to accept as a part of their crossbearing the punitive consequences of their action (Dan. 6; Acts 5:29; Matt.5:11-12).”⁴¹

To what current issues should the church speak? How might the responsibility of the individual Christian differ from the responsibility of the church as a corporate body? In what particular issues might civil disobedience become a more serious option or even a necessity in our nation, either now or in the future? Is such disobedience an example of constructing our own crosses?

Although there are a variety of ways in which we might choose to be politically active, a more critical task lies before us. The Lord Jesus commanded us to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name to all nations, including our own. As Paul told Timothy, the Word must be preached “in season and out of season” because the time is coming “when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Tim. 4:2-4). The proclamation of the Gospel, even in the face of hostility against the Word, will influence our nation and our world and, by God’s grace, turn people away from myths to the truth of Christ. The Lutheran theologian Carl Mundinger expressed the way in which this influence is accomplished:

Keeping strictly within her sphere, the Church must put forth every effort that the nation within whose boundaries she exists become more and more permeated with the principles of social life laid down in the Word of God, the principles of righteousness, of justice, of tolerance and forbearance, of mutual helpfulness and co-operation.

³⁸ *Render Unto Caesar . . . and Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State*, Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1995), 82.

³⁹ Links to reports of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations concerning marriage, abortion, immigration, and other issues are found in the list of resources at the end of this study.

⁴⁰ *Guidelines for Crucial Issues in Christian Citizenship*, 6.

⁴¹ *Civil Obedience and Disobedience*, Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1966), 5.

She must do this not by futile efforts to control legislation or to direct the administration of government, but by laboring patiently and persistently to increase the number of those within the nation whose hearts have been regenerated by the Spirit of God and whose lives are directed by that Spirit. Not by invading political assemblies, but by entering the pulpit with an emphatic and convincing proclamation of the whole Gospel of Christ can the Church make a real contribution to the political well-being of our nation.⁴²

We enjoy the blessings of freedom in our nation, but in Christ we enjoy a greater and eternal freedom, a freedom with purpose: “Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor” (1 Pet. 2:16-17).

Responsive Reading . . . Psalm 94

⁴²*Render Unto Caesar . . . and Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State*, 74. The Munding quote is taken from “Dangers Confronting the Church Today,” *The Abiding Word*, ed. Theodore Laetsch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946), 1:503-504.

Session 6:
Fear Not, I Am . . . the Living One” (Rev. 1:17-18)
Suffering, the Cross, and the Empty Tomb

About 50 years after the great fire of Rome in A. D. 64, the Roman historian Tacitus described the arrest of Christians blamed for the disaster. Many Romans did not necessarily think the Christians actually started the fire; according to popular opinion, the Emperor Nero was to blame. It was believed, however, that the Christian faith was a destructive superstition because Christians refused to acknowledge and worship the gods of Rome. The Christian “crime” was a social one, as Tacitus records in his *Annals*: “Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who confessed; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of arson, as of hatred of the human race. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths.”⁴³

Some opponents of the Christian faith today express agreement with the ancient accusation of “hatred of the human race.” Atheist author Sam Harris says of all religions, including Christianity: “We have been slow to recognize the degree to which religious faith perpetuates man’s inhumanity to man.”⁴⁴ Humanist author Hemant Mehta writes: “Do Christians do some good things? Yes. Absolutely. But I can’t focus on that when so many Christians are to blame for some major social injustices that I witness on a regular basis.”⁴⁵ Surveys indicate that some non-Christians perceive Christians as “judgmental, bigoted, sheltered, right-wingers, hypocritical, insincere, and uncaring. Outsiders say [Christians’] hostility toward gays—not just opposition to homosexual politics and behaviors but disdain for gay individuals—has become virtually synonymous with the Christian faith.”⁴⁶

Certainly we as Christians have not always lived up to our Lord’s call to love one another. It is sadly and terribly true that throughout history Christians have at times persecuted both fellow believers and unbelievers. We have much for which we must repent. Yet the world may also magnify the failings of Christians and even advance false accusations. Commenting on the hatred of the world that bears false witness against believers, Martin Luther wrote: “Wherever there are upright preachers and Christians, they must endure having the world call them heretics, apostates, even seditious and desperate scoundrels. Moreover, the Word of God must undergo the most shameful and spiteful persecution and blasphemy; it is the blind world’s nature to condemn and persecute the truth and the children of God and yet consider this no sin.”⁴⁷

What similar accusations have you heard or experienced? How do the above accusations, Roman and contemporary, provide evidence of Satan’s hostility toward the Word?

Jesus our Cornerstone is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” He built His Church on that rock-solid confession of truth, promising that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:16-18). Satan, for all of his hostility against the Word, cannot prevail against the Church, but generation upon generation

⁴³ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 556. “Popular rumor suggested that Christians were cannibals (based perhaps on a misunderstanding of the Lord’s Supper), atheists (like the Jews, Christians had no images in their shrines) and incestuous (their ‘love’ for one another was well known).” Tim Dowley, ed., *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 83.

⁴⁴ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 15.

⁴⁵ Hemant Mehta, “Why do Atheists Target Christians?” *Humanist Network News*, December 15, 2010, www.americanhumanist.org. The “major social injustices” to which Mehta refers include preventing children from learning about birth control and “safe sex,” opposition to gay marriage and to a woman’s right to choose abortion, and to the indoctrination of Christian children in religious beliefs.

⁴⁶ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, ed., *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 92.

⁴⁷ Martin Luther, Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, 421.262. See also 1 Corinthians 1:18.

after Eden and centuries after Tacitus' accusation, the ancient serpent still makes every attempt to do just that. Persecution against Christ's Body continues. The hostility may take shape as accusations of bigotry and intolerance, or in shame, ridicule, and the loss of religious liberty. It may be expressed in more harmful and deadly ways—in the loss of home and family, imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom.

How should Christians respond to persecution and hostility? With the early disciples we may rejoice to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus and forgive our enemies as Jesus asked forgiveness for those who crucified Him. Like saints of old, we can turn to the Lord in prayer, remaining faithful to the Word and using every opportunity to witness to our hope in Christ. When possible, we can take advantage of our rights as citizens, making every effort to preserve and protect our religious liberty as we proclaim the good news of salvation and serve others in Jesus' name. Yet, when all else is said and done, one response still remains. The Body of Christ *suffers*.

Although admittedly our persecutors have little trouble finding us, how is the Body of Christ recognized in the world? Church buildings are recognized by the crosses that decorate them, and persecutors delight in tearing those crosses down.⁴⁸ Christians themselves are marked more deeply. According to Luther, seven signs or marks identify the people of God, the Body of Christ on earth. These marks include the possession of the Word of God, Baptism, the Lord's Supper (with the Sacraments taught, believed, and administered according to Christ's command), the public exercise of the Office of the Keys (the forgiveness of sins or the withholding of forgiveness in the case of unrepentant sinners; John 20:23), the calling of ministers, and public prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. Along with these six signs, there is one more distinguishing mark: "Seventh, the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. And the only reason they must suffer is that they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's Word, enduring this for the sake of Christ, Matthew 5 [11], 'Blessed are you when men persecute you on my account.'"⁴⁹

The risen Savior told His astonished disciples: "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see" (Luke 24:39). Just as the crucified and risen Lord was identified and recognized by the marks of the nails and spear, His Body, the Church, is recognized by the mark of suffering and the cross. Jesus, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross and despised the shame (Heb. 12:2) and He calls us to do the same: "You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you will be put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your lives" (Luke 21:16-19). The apostle Paul tells us not to lose heart, and in inspired understatement describes the suffering we endure as a "light momentary affliction" that is "preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen" (2 Cor. 4:17-18; see also Rom. 8:18).

Things yet unseen, bodily resurrection and eternal glory, will be ours in Christ, but the cross comes first. "The blood of Christians is seed" and persecution is often followed by increase to the Church. Suffering also strengthens us as we are conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29). We "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" and "rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because

⁴⁸ In Iraqi Christian villages, ISIS militants have taken down crosses and burned church manuscripts. Kate Tracy, "Islamic State Seizes Iraq's Christian Capital: Qaraqosh," *Christianity Today*, Gleanings, posted August 7, 2014 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/august/islamic-state-seizes-iraqs-christian-capital-qaraqosh-isis.html>.

⁴⁹ Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), *Luther's Works*, vol. 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 165.

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:2-5). Luther commented on the way in which suffering strengthens God's people: "Since we know then that it is God's good pleasure that we should suffer, and that God's glory is manifested in our suffering, better than in any other way, and since we are the kind of people who cannot hold on to the Word and our faith without suffering, and moreover since we have the noble, previous [sic] promise that the cross which God sends to us is not a bad thing, but rather an utterly precious and noble holy thing, why should we not be bold to suffer?"⁵⁰ Paul, content—pleased—with weakness and persecution could boast: "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10).

Read Hebrews 10:32-39 and 1 Corinthians 12:26. According to these verses, how should we react to persecution and suffering, our own and that of others? What attitudes mark our response? How might these attitudes inform our prayers for our fellow saints and for ourselves as we bear the cross?

We bear the cross as our vocation, our calling, following in the footsteps of Christ, who suffered for us (1 Peter 2:21). We bear the cross in hope because our Lord, through His suffering, death, and resurrection, has conquered. By God's grace through faith in our risen Savior, His victory is ours. Satan wars against us, but "he knows that his time is short" (Rev. 12:12). Our enemy and accuser, who is behind every accusation of "social injustice" or "hatred of the human race," who tries endlessly to turn us from the Word, has fallen in defeat: "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev. 12:10-11). As the Body of Christ we continue to suffer hostility, accusations, and even death, but our hope is in Christ our Head who suffered all of these things and by His resurrection overcame them all. This rich mystery, Paul writes, "is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

Ascended to the right hand of the Father, Jesus reigns in glory until His return on the Last Day, when "the last enemy," death, will finally be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). On that day we will be raised bodily from our graves as Jesus was raised, to live and reign with Him forever. As we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death," we fear no evil because our Shepherd has walked there before us and walks with us now. We are "regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" and yet "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:36-37). Because of the victory that is already ours, Luther could mock the futile threats of his enemies: "It is a shame and disgrace to try to threaten and terrify Christ and his Christians with death for, after all, they are lords and victors over death. It is just like trying to frighten a man by bridling and saddling his horse and bidding him to ride on it."⁵¹

Read 1 Peter 5:6-11. What instruction for enduring persecution do you find here? How does humility become an aspect of resistance? How else can you resist the "roaring lion" who wants to devour you? What particular words of hope do you find in these verses?

While on the island of Patmos "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," John heard a voice like a trumpet. There before the apostle stood "one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, Sermon at Coburg on Cross and Suffering (1530), *Luther's Works*, 51:208. The word "previous" in this quotation from the American Edition of *Luther's Works* is a typographical error. The correct word is "precious," that is, "the noble, precious promise." In the German edition the word in question is *tewre* (*teuer* in modern German), which means "precious" or "costly." *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Band 32 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1906), 38, available at <https://archive.org/stream/werkekritischege32luthuoft#page/38/mode/2up>.

⁵¹ Martin Luther, A Letter of Consolation to All Who Suffer Persecution (1522), *Luther's Works*, 43:63.

edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev. 1:9-16). In the presence of such exalted majesty, John “fell at his feet as though dead” (Rev. 1:17), just as Paul had fallen to the ground when confronted by the Lord on the road to Damascus. This is the risen and reigning Lord Jesus, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. This is the Living One who asks, “Why are you persecuting *me*?” He is the King of kings and Lord of lords before whom each of us, including those who persecute us, will one day be called to account (Rom. 14:10-12). It is no wonder that Luther said we have reason to “weep and lament” for our persecutors, praying that before that great and terrible day they will come to know the truth. What awaits them is far more terrifying—eternally so—than what Paul calls the “light momentary affliction” that the cross-bearing saints now suffer.

What awaits the suffering saints is eternal joy in the presence of the Lamb. There we will stand in “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages . . . crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!’” Together with all the saints in that future scene—with Stephen, the first martyr, with the martyrs of ancient Rome, with the saints who suffer today in Iraq and across the world—we will have come out of “the great tribulation” of earthly suffering, having washed our robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The Lamb will be our Shepherd, as He always has been, and He will guide us to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rev. 7:9-17).

That day is yet to come. Until then, it is “boots on the ground” in the face of the unrelenting hostility of an enemy in his death throes who continues to war against the Word. The Word he so hates is the sword in our hand: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm” (Eph. 6:10-13).

Read Ephesians 6:10-20. *Although it is people who persecute us, we know we “do not wrestle against flesh and blood.” How does the armor of God in all of its various parts help us to stand firm in the face of hostility and persecution?*

Years before Jesus’ revelation on Patmos, John had seen the Lord in His divine majesty on the mountain of transfiguration. Then, too, hearing a voice from heaven, the apostle fell face down to the ground in terror. But when, at the Lord’s touch, John finally raised his head, he saw no one “but Jesus only” (Matt. 17:7-8). Now again on Patmos, the exalted and ever gentle Shepherd lays His right hand on John and says, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:17-18). The Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep securely holds His cross-bearing flock (John 10:28)—and no one can snatch them out of His hand.

Pray for Christians who are suffering, in our nation and around the world, that they might faithfully endure persecution and one day stand with all the saints in the presence of the Lamb. Pray for those who persecute them—for those who persecute us—that they may come to know and worship Jesus as Lord.

Responsive Reading . . . Psalm 46

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Commission on Theology and Church Relations
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*

Resources

Information from the LCMS Office of the President on prayers for the persecuted church:

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2014/statement-on-persecution>

<http://blogs.lcms.org/2014/statement-on-christian-persecution-in-iraq>

Prayers, including “For our enemies,” “For persecuted Christians,” “For the nation,” and “In times of affliction and distress,” *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: CPH, 2006), 305-318.

The Lutheran Witness (June/July 2014), Theme: Christian Persecution

<http://www.cph.org/witness/freeissue/index.html>

Journal of Lutheran Mission 1:2 (September 2014), Theme: The Cross and Suffering

http://issuu.com/thelcms/docs/journal_of_lutheran_mission_no2_sep/1

“The Bible and Christian Citizenship,” reprint of an article from the July 1996 issue of *The Lutheran Witness*

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=359>

Reports by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations:

The Natural Knowledge of God in Christian Confession and Christian Witness (2013)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=2431>

Immigrants Among Us: A Lutheran Framework for Addressing Immigration Issues (2012)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=2194>

Theology and Practice of Prayer: A Lutheran View (2011)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1745>

The Creator’s Tapestry: Scriptural Perspectives on Man-Woman Relationships in Marriage and the Church (2009)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=310>

Render Unto Caesar . . . And Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State (1995)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=360>

Racism and the Church (1994)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1052>

Christian Care at Life’s End (1993)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=361>

Abortion in Perspective (1984)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=363>

Guidelines for Crucial Issues in Christian Citizenship (1968)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=366>

Civil Obedience and Disobedience (1966)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=367>