



Dealing with Persecution

His Grace Bishop Youssef

Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Introduction

Persecution, with its multiple facets, has existed since the time of Christ and the Apostles up to this present day. It has been the source of a lot of discussions and disputes some of which being constructive while a lot being otherwise. This article addresses:

1. Types of persecutions.
2. Persecution from a biblical perspective.

1. Types of Persecution

Persecution can be classified typologically into three major types.

• Persecution because of religious beliefs:

Whereby an individual or a whole society is morally, psychologically and sometimes physically pushed to the edge against their religious beliefs. As a result, some end up denouncing their religion and adopting another one.

• Persecution because of moral beliefs:

Whereby individuals, especially youth, are pushed to the far end against their moral and ethical beliefs until they give up their ethics and start to conform to the world and what the persecutor dictates and offers as a substitute.



• Persecution against belief in the existence of a deity:

Whereby an individual or a society is restricted in their manner of worshipping God. For example, prevented from wearing religious symbols such as the Holy Cross, forced to remove the name of God from the Pledge of Allegiance, and to stop prayers at schools

2. Persecution from a biblical Perspective.

The survival of our Coptic church, after having been persecuted for 2000 years, is an indication that it dealt with this issue in the right way.

In dealing with persecution, we, Christians, have to look at it from a biblical perspective in order to understand how, in the past, our forefathers and the apostles dealt with it based on the Word of God.

• Persecution and integrity:

Persecution is an integral part of Christianity. Hence it should never threaten our integrity. 1 Peter 4:12, says, **“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trials which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you.”** Here St. Peter is telling us to regard persecution as something normal in our Christian life. St. Paul also says that if we want to live a Godly and righteous life with the Lord Jesus Christ, we should expect persecution, **“all who desire**



to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2Tim 3:12). Therefore, all of us in general and the youth in particular are not to be offended nor yield to pressure when we are subjected to any type of persecution. On the contrary, we should stick to purity and moral values up to the last day of our lives drawing persistence, courage and support from the wonderful incredible stories of the saints who welcomed persecution to the point of giving up their life for their beliefs and values rather than compromising them, earning thus the crown of martyrdom.

• **Persecution as permitted by God:** Although persecution is from the devil, God uses it to test our faith. Before the Cross, our Lord told Simon Peter **“Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren”** (Luke 22:31, 32). This statement of our Lord confirms the existence of temptation. On the other hand, it also guarantees victory through our Savior and great intercessor Jesus Christ provided we stand firm and do not fall through the sifter holes i.e. temptation. The Lord Jesus Christ reminded us **“whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple”** (Luke 14:27). There is no Christianity without the cross, and no godly life without persecution. From this we can conclude that persecution is a source of power and strength and not vice versa.

• **Persecution and courage:**

St. Peter intrigues us by saying, **“And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled”** (1Peter 3:13). Our Lord Jesus Christ supports this revelation in Luke 12:4, 5, **“And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell;**

yes, I say, fear Him.” Our problem is that we tend to limit our life to here and now forgetting about the there and after. Consequently we tend to get depressed at the thought of persecution because naturally, if that is all there is to life, then what is so great about living a very miserable life of continuous persecution, and then die? If we put eternity in perspective, where our persecutors will have no control over us, but only God will. Then things will fall in place concerning persecution. So we should not be afraid of being persecuted in this short earthly life, always looking up to our Savior Jesus Christ the author and finisher of our faith who suffered before us and accepted that willingly just for the sake of what he knew was going to be the outcome of that pain and death (Heb 12:2).

• **Persecution and endurance:**

God will not allow us to be persecuted with what is more than we can endure, nor allow anything that is beyond our capacity or tolerance to harm us (1Cor 10:13). Luke 12:6-7 is a great verse because it shows how much in control over all things big, or small God is **“Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins, and not one of them is forgotten before God.”** Although the fifth sparrow has no money value, yet it is not forgotten by God. If that sparrow is not forgotten by our Creator, how much more are we who are created in His own image and whom He has purchased at such a high cost, the blood of His own Son (1Pet 1: 18, 19). Even in the time of persecution, His eyes are on us and so we can never be forgotten. How encouraging and true His words are. **“But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”**

• **Persecution and Witnessing:**

The main thing that martyrs gave up their life for was confessing Jesus Christ as their sole Lord and Savior. Are we ready to witness for Christ under any circumstances? Persecution is not to stop or hinder our confession of Christ, but is to become an



opportunity for testimony (Luke 21:13). Our Lord also says, **“Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God”** (Luke 12: 8, 9). St. Peter says that we should not be troubled nor be afraid of their threats, rather sanctify the Lord in our



heart, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks us a reason for the hope that is in us with meekness and fear (1Peter 3:15). Our confession should start with exhibiting good attitude and behavior, rather than attacking others.

· *Persecution and the Holy Spirit*

Before His ascension into heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ promised to send to the world the Holy Spirit who will comfort, teach, and support us. The apostles knew that. That is why they were not scared of persecution. Like wise, we should trust in the Holy Spirit to guide us. Luke 12:11-12, reminds us **“Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about what or how you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”** Do not be concerned as it is the role of the Holy Spirit to put in your heart the words of wisdom. The Holy Spirit will guide and inspire you.

· *Persecution, a ticket to heaven.*

In 1Peter 4:19, St Peter urges us to **“therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.”** As a faithful Creator God will not allow anybody to mess up with His creation. If we just draw our eyes to heaven instead of concentrating

on earth, we should find consolation in our trials. When St. Stephen was about to be stoned, he switched his focus to heaven. He saw heaven open, and Jesus Christ standing there. This vision comforted him filling him with internal rejoice, and was thus able to endure the stoning. In the midst of all the agony and the confusion, St. Stephen did not forget his fellowmen and

in particular his persecutors. He felt for them knowing that they were in need of forgiveness for what they were about to do to him. This tells us a lot about what the Holy Spirit was doing inside Stephen. He was encouraging him and the result was the state of steadfastness he was in. The Holy Spirit was also reminding him of the teachings of His Master Jesus Christ concerning forgiveness. From that we understand that the Holy Spirit was actively working within Stephen accomplishing and completing the work that His master had started before him. Thus was the Holy Spirit preparing St. Stephen for the crown of martyrdom and glory. St. Stephen is the best role model for how, during trials, we should switch our focus to heaven, to our faithful Creator, believing that every stone thrown at us is a precious jewel added to our crown in heaven. Then and only then will we experience the comfort, support, and strength in lieu of the pain and suffering. In 2Corinthians 1:3 St. Paul says **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all tribulations, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”** Also in 2Corinthians 6:9 St. Paul says, **“As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, and yet always rejoicing; as poor, and yet making many riches; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”** If we



are to be persecuted, we will not, for sure, be forsaken.

· Persecution and Reward:

Our Lord Jesus Christ says, **“Blessed are you when they persecute you and revile you, and say every word of evil against you for My sake falsely. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad for great is your reward in heaven”** (Matthew 5: 11-12). Therefore we should rejoice looking forward to the great reward. 1Peter 4:13 says, **“but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.”** So every time we are persecuted, there is a great reward awaiting us in heaven, should we not rejoice then?

· Persecution and Goodness:

Goodness is an essential attribute of our Creator. If we are to be Christ-like, we must partake of His attributes, one of which being goodness. When we fight back, curse, use wrong language, we will not be doing what God told us to do **“out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so”** (James 3:10). St. Peter teaches us, **“not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing”** (1Pet 3:9) and also St. Paul shares with us what we should do when reviled **“Being reviled, we bless”** (1Cor 4:12). He also says, **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”** (Rom 12:21). You can not overcome evil by evil, but only by goodness. In Romans 12:19 St. Paul says, **“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regards for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peacefully with all men. Do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord”**. If we treat evil with goodness, it is not out of fear that we do this, but rather out of strength. Leave vengeance to God and He will do a better job. Knowing that God is the

re-payer and the ultimate judge; should we not then rest assured repeating with St Paul, **“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us”** (Rom 8: 35-37).

May the Lord Jesus Christ who trod down the path of persecution and pain **“for the joy that was set before Him”** (Heb 12:2) fill our hearts and souls with His integrity, courage, perseverance, and good deeds focusing our attention on Him, the author and finisher of our faith, and on heaven our permanent glorious home with the angels and the saints. To Him be all the glory and praise and honor Amen.

Happy is the Christian who studies and follows the teaching of Christ. He is happy in this temporary life and in the life after death. Yes, he will be happy after death, because the soul does not vanish after death, is not perishable like the body, but continues to live, to exist. Through death, it is simply separated from the perishable body.

· St. Raphael ·