

May 21, 2023
Seventh Sunday after Easter
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

1 Peter 4:12–19, 5:6–11 (Acts 1:12–26; John 17:1–11)

DO NOT BE SURPRISED BY FIERY TRIALS.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Christian persecution is real and not just in faraway places. Christians are being persecuted in America and the devil is in the details. Go ahead and call me a conspiracy theorist but your blood does not have to be shed or your neighbor martyred for it to be persecution. The definition of persecution also includes *hostility and ill-treatment of those who differ in origin, religion, or social outlook*. (cf: Concise Oxford English Dictionary; Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.) In the words one Christian and cultural writer:

“...you don’t have to be lunchmeat for a hungry lion or lit up as a torch in Nero’s palace before it’s fair to claim that you’re facing persecution as a Christian.” (<https://www.standingforfreedom.com/2022/07/yes-christians-are-being-persecuted-in-america-heres-how-we-can-respond/>)

Anti-Christian hostility is higher right now than at any other time in our nation’s history. In the first three months of this year there have been 69 acts of hostility against churches in 29 states, including 53 acts of vandalism, 10 arson attacks or attempts, three gun-related incidents, three bomb threats and two incidents of assault. (cf: <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF23D04.pdf>)

Currently, ideology and rhetoric contrary to fundamental biblical teachings and beliefs are shoved into your life from the highest levels of government and corporate America. Elected officials want legal abortion on demand at any point of pregnancy. They want to force schools to open bathrooms, dorm rooms, and showers to anyone who identifies as a particular sex. (cf: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-preventing-and-combating-discrimination-on-basis-of-gender-identity-or-sexual-orientation/>) They want to make it a crime to counsel children and adults with gender dysphoria against transitioning to a different sex. (cf: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/06/15/fact-sheet-president-biden-to-sign-historic-executive-order-advancing-lgbtqi-equality-during-pride-month/>) During the pandemic they forced many churches as casinos and strip clubs were allowed to stay open. (cf: <https://www.christianpost.com/news/california-churches-turn-into-temporary-strip-clubs-to-be-open.html>) That is Christian persecution.

The Christian does not trust in earthly princes but takes refuge in the Lord. (cf: Psalm 118:9) Just like Peter and the apostles when they were ordered by the high priest to *not* preach the Name of Jesus, they answered:

“We must obey God rather than men.” (Acts 5:29)

June is “pride” month and you can expect corporate marketing campaigns to glorify and celebrate every sort of perversion at the highest level. Year around, inside their offices employees are likely be harassed and passed over for promotion for holding fast to God’s created

order that boys are boys, and girls are girls, and that God's design for marriage is only between one man and one woman. If you do not believe Christians are being persecuted for biblical beliefs, just bring up the biblical view of abortion, marriage, and gender at your next family reunion.

While God has not called everyone to be a preacher or teacher – He has called all believers to be salt and light in this unsavory and darkened world. (cf: Matthew 5:13–16) Just as He sends pastors and missionaries into His harvest fields, He sends you into your various vocations and stations of life to imitate Christ and to share His Gospel. (cf: Matthew 9:37–38; Ephesians 5:1–20) He sends you to your unbelieving neighbors to tell of the redeeming love that God has in Christ Jesus your Savior. Faith comes from hearing the Gospel, so if that neighbor never hears the lifesaving truth of the Gospel, that Christ loved them unto death on the cross, how can the Holy Spirit create faith within their unbelieving hearts? (cf: Romans 10:17)

Christians *are being* persecuted and it is going to get worse. The devil is in the details, so you brother and sister Christian, prepare yourself for the persecution to come. In our epistle reading this morning St Peter says:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12)

Peter is writing his letter from Rome. He is witnessing in real time Nero's ever-increasing tyranny against Christians who are being murdered for his entertainment and martyred for their faith. So Peter writes this letter as instruction and encouragement to his fellow believers that they – and you and I today – endure suffering for the sake of the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

He says that persecution should not be viewed as strange. The fact is, Christian persecution is completely normal in this sinful world. It has taken place since King Herod the Great began His search for the Christ Child so he could destroy Him. (cf: Matthew 2:13–15) While Herod was unsuccessful in killing the baby Jesus, he had all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under put to death in hopes of destroying Jesus. (cf: Matthew 2:16) Even though St Stephen was the first Christian to be martyred for his ***confession of Christ***, the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem were the first infant martyrs who died because of the ***hatred of Christ***. And things have not changed in over two-thousand years.

Holy Scripture teaches that there are only two spiritual kingdoms in the world: the Kingdom of God, and the kingdom of the devil. All who are baptized and trust and believe in Christ Jesus for forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation – they are ***sons of God*** through faith and members of His Kingdom. (cf: Galatians 3:26–27) That means everyone else, all who are not in Christ, are ***sons of disobedience*** and ***children of wrath***. (cf: Ephesians 2:1–3) They follow the devil and are members of his kingdom living out the passions of the world and the flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. Just like you and me prior to new life in Baptism, they are by nature enemies of God and opposed to His kingdom.

Until now, you and I have pretty much escaped serious physical persecution, but things are quickly changing. Persecution is being dished in all shapes and sizes. And in these dark and later days it is even coming from within the visible church – coming from those who are supposed to be brothers and sisters in Christ but have been deceived by the devil.

They cut and paste the Bible into a false gospel that teaches cleverly devised myth that suits their own passions. (cf: 2 Timothy 4:3-4; 2 Peter 1:16) They adopt heretical doctrines in the name of inclusiveness, individual autonomy, and church growth. And when you take a stand for the inspired, authoritative, and inerrant Word of God as the only rule and norm for Christian teaching – they look at you as if you have lobsters crawling out of your ears and call you unloving. But remember St Peter’s words:

“If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (1 Peter 4:14)

The fountain and source of all suffering and persecution comes from:

“Your adversary the devil [who] prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8)

The devil wants you to believe that Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection to win your salvation is a fantastic fable and fairy tale. He wants you to believe that God has abandoned you in your turmoil and time of need so you must save yourself. But dear Christian – take heart. God has a purpose for allowing you to undergo persecution. It is not punishment for your sins. Jesus has already bore the wrath and paid the price of your sin by shedding His blood on the cross. God allows trials in your life “... ***to test you...***” (1 Peter 4:12) He strengthens the Christian through affliction. Through hardship, He fortifies your faith and drives you to the foot of the cross where you:

“look... to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of [y]our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” (Hebrews 12:2)

Nothing happens in this world apart from the will of God. In your adversity you “...***suffer according to God’s will...***” (1 Peter 4:19) And although you do not know God’s hidden will, by faith, you trust that He has the best in mind for you. So cast all your anxieties on Him. He will strengthen, uphold, and bless you in the midst of persecution. He will use your afflictions for your own good – or – for the good of others.

This does not mean that the fiery trials of persecution are going to be easy. Suffering for the sake of the Gospel is not pleasant: the verbal abuse, loss of family and friends, imprisonment, and even death. But, for the Christian, suffering and death for the sake of the Gospel is an ***honor*** – because you recognize how much Christ Jesus suffered to save you from your sin.

In his letter, Peter is telling the Christians of all time that they are preserved by Christ in the face of trials. You cannot preserve yourself any more than you can raise yourself from the dead. Christ alone keeps you safe from true harm. And what is true harm? True harm is denying Christ. Take comfort in Jesus words when He says:

“... when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” (Luke 12:11-12)

God does not promise some special intervention and extraction. No. He has armed you with His Word and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will strengthen you by the Gospel to keep you in the true faith. The Spirit will give you courage to confess Christ and Him crucified. The Spirit will aide you to speak clearly the truth of Jesus as you have come to know it from Holy Scripture. No persecutor can triumph over the victory of Christ for His people. Even if death separates you

from this world, it cannot separate you from the love of God and the redemption accomplished through Christ Jesus. (cf: Romans 8:37–39) The fire of being or lit up as a torch in Nero’s palace only lasts for a little while. The fires of hell prepared for the devil, his minions, and all who refuse to believe, last for eternity.

In our Gospel text, Jesus is praying to the Father in heaven as He is about to be betrayed, severely beaten, nailed to a cross where He would die for your sins and the sins of the whole world. He knows that His disciples and the entire Christian Church is prepared. He has given the Church everything she needs. He prays:

“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)

“I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.” (John 17:8)

By faith in Christ Jesus, you have eternal life. He gives you everything you need in Word and Sacrament. In the midst of good times and bad, trials and tribulations, tyranny and persecution, He will never leave you nor forsake you. (cf: Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5) He is your Creator and Redeemer and He is with you to the very end of the age. (cf: Matthew 28:20)

He gave His life on the cross so that you would never be separated from Him and the Father. You are in His care – even in the face of death. Clinging to Christ crucified ***for you*** and His Word, He will keep you in His Name and sustain your faith so that you endure. He will preserve you until He carries you into eternal life in heaven for the sake of Christ Jesus.

St Peter writes:

“Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” (1 Peter 4:13)

“And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1 Peter 5:10–11)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.