

## SESSION 1: RECOGNIZING THE DANGER

### WARNING SIGNS

Life is full of warnings, whether in the form of announcements or symbols. A yellow light. A flashing "Railroad Crossing." A voice, "The doors are closing." A bright sign, "This Lane Ends." "Bridge Out Ahead." A few years ago, I had a calcium heart scan. It became a warning—change your cholesterol numbers, Brad. I often will pull a Seminary student aside for a soft warning, "You know you dropped the ball on the last assignment. But we both know you can do better on the final paper. It's due in three weeks; work on it."

We need warnings. It is human nature to avoid or minimize unwelcome news. Pain is something we tend to avoid. Therefore, warnings that pain, conflict, judgment, or struggles are coming are often ignored. In the Old Testament, the Israelites almost always disregarded the messages the Lord sent to warn them. And they suffered significant consequences for it.

Still, as truth seekers and biblical leaders, we cannot avoid unpleasant truths. We see Andrew Brunson's persecution in Turkey and think that this could never occur here in America. But are we right? We are called to ask honest questions, including: **"Will significant persecution come to those who follow Jesus?"** With a spiritual urgency, we believe the answer is clearly "yes." Let's begin looking at some apparent reasons why.

#### A. HISTORICALLY, PERSECUTION HAS ALWAYS COME.

Except for rare seasons of peace, the history books show that followers of Jesus are always persecuted. From its founding, persecution has been associated with Christianity. Stephen models that within a few years of Jesus' death, Christians were killed for their faith. All but one of the Apostles was executed. The world sent persecutions from Nero (AD 67), Domitian (81), Trajan (108), and a host of sequential Roman emperors. Beginning in the seventh century, Islamic leaders, the Ottomans, and the Arab-Caliphate persecuted the Church. In the late 1700s, the "Reign of Terror" following the French Revolution excised almost all Christian worship from France. Then followed much more modern persecution against Christians by Kangxi, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Hitler, and Franco. Today, we might add China's Xi, North Korea's Kim Jong-Un, and India's BJP Party.

### Andrew's Keys from Session 1

- SPIRITUAL URGENCY
- EXCLUSIVITY OF JESUS
- OBEDIENCE
- PREPARE TO STAND
- CHANGE OUR MINDSET
- THE LION IS WITH US

"They who wish to be exempt from persecutions must necessarily renounce Christ."

■ John Calvin, 1550

"The Lord challenges us to suffer persecutions and to confess him. He wants those who belong to him to be brave and fearless. He himself shows how weakness of the flesh is overcome by courage of the spirit. This is the testimony of the apostles, and in particular of the representative administering Spirit. A Christian is fearless."

■ Tertullian, c. 200

The Church's own authorities often attacked people of faith. John Wycliffe was burned in England with his commentaries on the Bible in 1384. In 1412, Joan of Arc was executed for "hearing directly from God in prayer," and in 1536 William Tyndale was executed for writing a modern language Bible. From 1621-1633, John Bunyan was imprisoned in England for preaching the gospel, and wrote much of *Pilgrim's Promise* in his cell. From inside and outside, persecution has come.

Persecution and Faith dance together, it seems. Hebrews reminds us about the life of faith: *"There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground"* (Heb. 11:35-38).

#### B. GLOBALLY, WIDESPREAD PERSECUTION IS OCCURRING NOW.

In unprecedented ways around the world, Christians are being jailed, beaten, or killed. In the west, after many years of a normative Judeo-Christian society, the world is quickly turning against people of the faith. In May 2019, the BBC News released a report titled *"Christian Persecution at Near Genocide Levels."* Under North Korea's *songbun* system, citizens are classified based on their perceived loyalty to the state. Christians belong to the "hostile" class, which limits their access to educational and employment opportunities, or sends them to reeducation camps. According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (2020 report), Christians in Burma, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Vietnam are persecuted.

"More than 70 million Christians have been martyred in the course of history. In the 21st century, roughly 100,000 to 160,000 Christians were killed *each year*; and about 1,093,000 Christians were martyred, worldwide, between 2000 and 2010."

■ The  
EstherProject.com

According to *Open Doors*, "Around the world, more than 340 million Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution, just for following Jesus. That's 1 in 8 believers, worldwide, and growing."

#### C. IN THE WEST, WE ARE MOVING FROM A TIME OF A POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY TO AN ANTI-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY.

As the culture in the west, fueled by what Andrew defined as the "commanding heights of American culture"—the corporate world, big tech, art, media, entertainment, professional sports, schools and universities, and government bureaucracies—society has moved away from biblical values. Our Christian beliefs about God, faith, marriage, sexuality, and human life are

under increasing pressure. Christians are increasingly cast as narrowminded, intolerant, poisonous, or malicious. It is worthwhile to examine our society based on its treatment of Christians. A few years ago, the Catholic Church commissioned a study of practices used to attack any specialized, target group. This covered persecuted groups of all types from throughout history.

**The study identified five stages of persecution:**

- 1) Stereotyping of a target group so that they are seen as different than the norm.** This is applying an overly simplistic caricature of a group. People at this stage say, "All Christians are superstitious, hypocritical, self-righteous, repressed, and sexist."
- 2) Vilifying the target group as harmful to others.** This makes bigotry permissible. We might hear, "Christians are against human dignity, in opposition to science, homophobic, and intolerant. Christianity is a negative force on the planet."
- 3) Marginalizing the group's influence to the periphery of society.** The secularists comment, "Since Christians are harmful, faith (and Christmas trees) must be kept in private, and excluded from education, workplaces, social media, and political dialogue."
- 4) Criminalizing the target group or their practices.** This includes litigation, legal injunctions, and rulings limiting religious freedom: "If you—a Christian—refuse to bake a cake/do a wedding for religious conscience reasons, we will punish or compel you."
- 5) Persecuting the targeted group outright.** The group is a danger so it must be stopped. This includes fines, restrictions, incarcerations, or killings. Those in power believe, "Christians must be removed from our society, shut down, and punished."

#### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

"The loss of the Christian religion is why the West has been fragmenting for some time now, a process that is accelerating. How did it happen? There were five landmark events over seven centuries that rocked Western civilization and stripped it of its ancestral faith:

- In the fourteenth century, the loss of belief in the integral connection between God and Creation—or in philosophic terms, transcendent reality and material reality.
- The collapse of religious unity and religious authority in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.
- The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which displaced the Christian religion with the cult of Reason, privatized religious life, and inaugurated the age of democracy.
- The Industrial Revolution (ca. 1760–1840) and the growth of capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- The Sexual Revolution (1960–present)."

■ Rod Dreher,  
*The Benedict Option*

#### D. BIBLICALLY, WE ARE REPEATEDLY WARNED TO EXPECT PERSECUTION.

*"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you." (Jesus in John 15:18-19)*

*"The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away." (Jesus in Matt. 13:20-22)*

*"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' (Rom. 8:35-37)*

*"In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know." (1 Thes. 3:4-5)*

*"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." (2 Cor. 4:7-9)*

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) Looking at the five stages of persecution, above, where do you think we are now in America?
- 2) Jesus said clearly, "No one comes to the Father but through me." (John 14:6). How do you feel about this? Why is the exclusivity of Jesus so difficult for our culture?
- 3) Why is trusting the Lion of Judah, Jesus, so key in persecution?

#### ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Talk with a Christian you know about what they see changing in this world. Ask them, "Is persecution against Christians possible in America?" Share what you have learned about persecution.
- ✓ Begin to pray regularly, "Lord, prepare me to stand."
- ✓ Read *Live Not by Lies* by Rod Dreher.

#### FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—MARK 13, JESUS GIVES A CLEAR WARNING

As disciples, how are we to respond to the promise/warning of persecution? In Mark 13:9-20, Jesus speaks to his disciples about the coming persecution. While some of this was fulfilled in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, most scholars agree that Jesus is warning all of those who would follow him throughout the coming ages. Let's examine this warning in detail.

**Text**    Mark 13:9-20

<sup>9</sup> ***"You must be on your guard.***

***You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. <sup>10</sup> And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. <sup>11</sup> Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.***

<sup>12</sup> ***"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.***

<sup>13</sup> ***Everyone will hate you because of me...***

***but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved...***

<sup>20</sup> ***If the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would survive. But for the sake of the elect, whom he has chosen, he has shortened them."***

Examination

Jesus issues a clear warning, and a command be on your guard. The Greek word, *blepete*, means emphatically, "Take heed!" or "Watch out!" or "Be ready!" It is a call to vigilance. He then explains why.

"You (all of you) will be handed over...." (Note that *you* is plural here). Governments and authorities will question our beliefs and then punish Christians for those beliefs. Note that this persecution is widespread, both from Jewish and Gentile sources, both local and national, "on account of me (Jesus)." The answer is that the Spirit will reveal God's message as needed.

This persecution is also personal. Families will betray each other, and even seek to have Christian family members executed.

As a whole, the society—"everyone"—will hate us. Because of our connection to Jesus.

Here "stands firm" translates the ancient Greek word *hupomeno*, which literally means to "remain under." When trials and persecution occur, we cannot compromise to find an escape. To be "saved" from this persecution, we must be ready to endure—"to the end."

Thankfully, God, rather than our own strength is our source of endurance. God must intervene to keep the Christian church from being exterminated on earth—"no one would survive." His watchful eye and care follow us, the elect, through all the coming days.