

SESSION 7: SOME BENEFITS OF PERSECUTION

A QUICK REVIEW

In the final session, Andrew reviews the main keys of ***Prepare to Stand***. He has previously discussed four dangers or temptations in times of persecution:

- 1 We respond in fear
- 2 We become offended at God
- 3 We pursue pleasure as an escape
- 4 We are derailed by deception

Andrew has also discussed six keys to helping us endure hardship and persecution with a healthy soul:

- 1 Talk about persecution
- 2 Develop fear of God
- 3 Pursue the heart of God
- 4 Build perseverance
- 5 Build community
- 6 Guard the Word

TEN UNEXPECTED BLESSINGS WHICH COME FROM SUFFERING

Andrew then moves to list the concrete blessings which God grows in us in challenging times. 1 Peter 3:14 contains this promise: *"But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed."* What are these blessings?

- 1 We grow closer to Jesus as we suffer for him.

It seems counterintuitive that suffering for someone can pull you closer to them, but it often works this way. Andrew noted that as he endured pain for the name of his Lord, his love became more committed. He was willing to take more risks for him. He could endure more, for his love carried him more. There is no such thing as pointless pain in the life of the child of God. We grow in hard times. How this has encouraged and strengthened so many Christians in the valleys of suffering and pain! Proverbs 10:25 promises,

When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone, but the righteous stand firm forever.

Andrew's Keys from Session 7

- TEN BLESSINGS OF PERSECUTION
 - 1 CLOSER TO JESUS
 - 2 DEEPER INTIMACY WITH GOD
 - 3 PURSUE GOD MORE
 - 4 RELATE TO THE HEART OF JESUS
 - 5 BEAR GOD'S NATURE
 - 6 MORE SENSITIVE TO SIN
 - 7 MORE PERSEVERANCE
 - 8 ON DISPLAY FOR BELIEVERS
 - 9 ON DISPLAY FOR NONBELIEVERS
 - 10 ETERNAL REWARDS

"There is an acute difference between knowing about God and knowing God...It is difficult for sensual creatures to enjoy fellowship with One who cannot be seen, heard, tasted, touched, or smelled. God remains beyond my senses. How then, can I ever relate to Him with intimacy? My heart longs for fellowship with Him! I long to hear His voice as the sound of many waters and to catch one glimpse of his refulgent glory...What I crave is a relationship with God that is both intimate and personal."

■ R.C. Sproul

2 We gain a more confident intimacy with God.

Pain and difficulties help us define who we are at the core. The word intimate is derived from the Latin word *intimus*, which means “inmost.” According to the Webster’s dictionary, it broadly means, “inmost, essential, most inward, internal.” To be intimate with someone is to share the deepest parts of them. Intimacy with God, then, is the experience that someone knows God and is known by God in the inmost ways. In this relationship, we experience God’s companionship, love, and acceptance. With the psalmist we say, “*for me it is good to be near God*” (Psalm 73:28). We realize God’s promise: “*Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you*” (James 4:8).

3 We pursue God more.

Andrew insightfully knows, “Pressure makes us run after God as never before.” Psalm 42 is about the soul’s hunger arising from difficulties, “*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*”

When our realities become harsh, we either run from God or to God. Suffering is often used to help us know God better. As we gain closeness, we bear more of God’s nature. We see others, and Jesus, better.

4 We relate to the heart of Jesus.

Get drenched together in a thunderstorm, get lost in a strange town, or share tears at a funeral. You develop a new bond at these times. In the same way, sharing in suffering draws us closer to a Jesus who was willing to die for us. Paul says it this way,

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:10-11)

Paul already knew Christ as his savior. But in the Greek, *to know* means “a knowing by experience.” Paul desires to experience Christ fully—from his highs of resurrection power to his lows of suffering. As we join in the painful costs of faith, as Jesus did, we understand him better. Andrew has found that, “I love Jesus even more now because I suffered for him.” In the same way, Paul knows that suffering will draw him closer to his Lord. In Romans 8:17 he speaks relationally about this shared connection with Jesus, “*Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*”

Andrew learned something from prison. “God had been answering my prayers in ways I did not notice.” He began to see that he was sharing many of the things Jesus experienced, and so he could relate more to Jesus. “Shared experience strengthens friendship,” explains Andrew.

Jesus was fully human. He grew hungry and weary (Matt. 21). Part of why the Son took on a fully human nature was to share the path of suffering which is a fallen humankind’s destiny. Hebrews 4:15-16 speaks of Jesus sharing our weaknesses: “*15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.*” Jesus faced more persecution than we ever will, and never renounced his Father.

He understands each of our sufferings. As we endure, submit, and cling to God in *our time of need*, we also understand Jesus more.

5 We bear more of God's nature.

2 Peter 1:4 tells us, *"Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them **you may participate in the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires"*.

God is making us more like his Son (Rom. 8:29), that we may share more of Jesus' *divine nature*. Suffering changes our heart. Brokenness makes us more sensitive to the frailty of others. We become more like Jesus, gentle and humble of heart.

"We want to avoid suffering, death, sin, ashes. But we live in a world crushed and broken and torn, a world God Himself visited to redeem. We receive his poured-out life, and being allowed the high privilege of suffering with Him, may then pour ourselves out for others."

■ Elizabeth Elliott

6 We become more sensitive to sin.

In this video, Andrew reflects on how imprisonment changed him. "Suffering made me more sensitive to sin and concentrated my mind and heart on living for God." 1 Peter 4:1-2 tells us,

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin. As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.

As we suffer, God begins to purify us. This makes sin more abhorrent to us. God is purifying his Bride, the Church. While we remain imperfect, the focus on resisting evil and seeking God trains us to reject sin. We find it easier to live for God. Andrew calls this, "A deep and long-lasting reorientation of the heart."

7 We gain more perseverance.

James 1:2-4 reads, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*

Finding joy in the coming days may be difficult. But God has a plan to grow us to maturity. I may dislike it sometimes, but I know God cares more about our maturity than our comfort. Andrew observes, "Every time we flex the muscle of perseverance, we become stronger and more determined." As we grow in perseverance, we are more able to face grim times, and to help others make it through safely. Andrew quotes the message of God to Jeremiah: *"If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses? If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?"* (Jer. 12:5). God allows hardship, so we are stronger for whatever lies ahead. Suffering helps us become more effective in resisting evil.

8 Persecution puts us on display for other Christians.

A psychological study found that an individual will give in to the crowd if they feel alone—even if they think the crowd is wrong. But if there is just one other voice which holds to the right answer, this individual becomes 90% more likely to stand against the crowd. To hold to what they believe is right. Have you considered that Pastor Andrew, by God's choice, gained an international audience for the Gospel through his persecution? It came at an excessive cost: he gained it separated from those he loved behind bars under the threat of a life sentence in a Turkish prison. Unsought, Andrew became an encouragement, a voice for the right answer, for other Christians suffering unknown in darkness around the world. A voice helping us all stand against the multitude's madness. Persecution puts us on display for believers to see. We become a part of God's great cloud of witnesses, most who suffered severely for their faith. In prison, Andrew understood, "If they did it, I can do it, too!" Our faith becomes a light for other believers to see.

9 Persecution puts us on display for nonbelievers.

We also become God's exhibition for non-believers, too. They may despise or misunderstand us, but they cannot help to wonder how we can endure. The greater the cost of our faithfulness, the deeper their confusion. They may begin to wonder about the reality of God we trust. They may ask themselves, "What am I missing?" Look at the quote from one of Christianity's archenemies, Karl Marx. In a private letter to a friend, even Marx wondered if there was a "a religious reality"—a real God—whom he could not destroy. Our faith is a light to unbelievers, a city set on a hill. We are children of Light. Prepare yourselves and your family to be ready for display. To be ready to shine the light of Christ in the darkness.

10 Suffering focuses us on our eternal rewards.

Those who endure suffering for our faith will be greatly rewarded for eternity. I know few Christians who follow Jesus to get heavenly rewards. But we must remember, God has always rewarded faithfulness. Our endurance and faith produce great honor for God and his name. Peter knows this. *"In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."* (1 Peter 1:6-8)

"The child of God is often called to suffer because there is nothing that will convince onlookers of the reality and power of true religion as suffering will do, when it is borne with Christian fortitude."

■ F.B. Meyer

"When all the political foundations of religion are wiped out, when the organization and the institutional structure of the church are destroyed, then normally religious faith, the Christian faith, would have to disappear. But it is not out of the question that the Christian faith will survive anyhow. This would mean that there is a religious reality that does not depend solely on the sociological and the institutional; and under these conditions, we would have to heed this reality, which is not in the category of traditional religion."

■ Karl Marx, 1843

"In this you greatly rejoice..." We are filled with joy, as is Jesus, who is pleased with those who prove their faithfulness. Daniel looks ahead to a time of some of the greatest suffering ever. He sees clearly how a future enemy will be looking for people to devour, to destroy, and to kill. In Daniel 11:31 we find hope, *"but the people who know their God will display strength and take action."* Andrew comments,

If you know your God, you will stand firm. And God is certainly interested in our standing firm. But he actually wants us to go beyond this. *God's people will stand firm and take action.* We are meant not only to survive intensive pressure, but we are meant to carry out assignments for God.

We—God's people—will display strength and act. This is a life with no regrets. Where we are dedicated to being faithful. To being obedient. To being on display as Christ's light. To loving others tangibly. To standing. Our reward will be great. We will be the pure Bride of Christ—a Bride who has suffered and proven her love and allegiance. This is a Bride worthy of her Beloved. Remember the goal: *"Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then..."* (Eph. 6:13-14)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSION OR REFLECTION

- 1) This video series has focused on creating deeper knowledge and intimacy with God to help endure whatever comes. Honestly, how well do you feel you are doing this?
- 2) Some say we can be, "Too heavenly minded to be of earthly good." Do you agree? How does this fit with an eternal perspective?

"The old, hard totalitarianism had a vision for the world that required the eradication of Christianity. The new, soft totalitarianism does too, and we are not equipped to resist its sneakier attack..."

Today? The Western world has become post-Christian, with large numbers of those born after 1980 rejecting religious faith. This means that they will not only oppose Christians when we stand up for our principles—in particular, in defense of the traditional family, of male and female gender roles, and of the sanctity of human life—but also they will not even understand why they should tolerate dissent based in religious belief. We cannot hope to resist the coming soft totalitarianism if we do not have our spiritual lives in order."

■ Rod Dreher,
Live Not by Lies

ACTION STEPS

- ✓ Examine your heart. In what ways do we sometimes put our faith light "under a basket" instead of on a stand? Why could God desire that the basket be removed—brought into the open—even by painful times?
- ✓ Look again at Andrew's list of ten blessings of persecution, above. Confess your fears in prayer and ask God for clear opportunities to shine.
- ✓ Pray, "Father, I thank you that you are the perfecter of my faith. Help me to have your perspective on all things."

FOR DEEPER STUDY OR TEACHING—CARRYING GLORY IN PAPER CUPS

Text 2 Corinthians 4:1-12

1 *Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. 2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.*

3 *And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*

5 *For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.*

7 *But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*

8 *We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.*

10 *We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. 12 So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you...*

Examination

Therefore relates back to the last verse in the previous chapter. "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory..." We are being made like him. For this reason—his unchanging mercy toward us—we do not lose heart as Christians. We do not give up in tough times. We stand firm. We hold on.

Instead, we live life in the open and without shame. We are not deceived nor deceivers, and we do not distort God's Word, but set it forth plainly. How people react (good or bad) is in the sight of God. We are under his watchful eye.

The battle is spiritual—for *the god of this age*, Satan, has *blinded the minds of unbelievers*, and sought to *veil the gospel* that Jesus is Lord so that *they cannot see the light* which displays God's glory in Christ. Blinded by deception, only God can unveil their eyes.

Our message in persecution is not about our own strength or obedience. We are simply servants, telling people about Jesus. For the Creator God—who made the universe—*made his light shine in us*. We now reflect his glory, as we seek more intimacy with God and pursue the heart of Jesus. We have *God's glory displayed in the face of Christ* in jars of clay, disposable paper cups, to make this clear: It is Jesus' glory, not ours.

Paul pulls no punches. We are *hard pressed on every side*. Life is full of hardships and persecution. But we survive. We don't despair. We are always aware that Jesus has not abandoned us. He will keep us from destruction. We always carry Jesus' sacrifice inside us, the Cross. We share about his sacrificial death so that others may have *life at work* in them. Death nips at our heels, but it produces life in others. If we stand firm, we are fulfilling God's plan—reproducing spiritual life in those around us.