

Persecution can be a mighty well-disguised blessing

This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of March 6-7, 2010.

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Our elder Brother Jesus Christ, at the conclusion of the Beatitudes, equated receiving persecution, vilification, insults and false accusations as a kind of prelude, gateway or portal to blessings.

During the dark and dismal days of World War II, when one well-meaning adviser tried to convince Winston Churchill that a major calamity was actually a blessing in disguise, the crusty prime minister curtly replied, "It certainly is a mighty well-disguised blessing."

He could have been describing the conclusion of the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:10-11.

The apostle Paul reaffirms this rather painful rite of passage when he admonished Timothy: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Axiomatically, when righteousness comes into contact with sin, persecution erupts as the automatic explosive reaction, similar to the noisy effervescent interaction between vinegar and soda—or perhaps the painful reaction to salt (or hydrogen peroxide) on a wound.

The apostle Paul metaphorically describes the antagonistic interplay between sin and righteousness as the relationship between light and dark.

Like cockroaches rushing away from the light, "everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed" (John 3:20).

Because righteousness and sin cannot coexist without a violent turbulent reaction, persecution (whether it comes in the form of verbal abuse, financial sanctions or retributions, gruesome torture or martyrdom) is the inevitable result.

Pragmatic blessings

Why would Jesus consider something so loathsome and unpleasant as a source of blessings? Many commentaries have focused exclusively on the future "great is your reward in heaven" explanation without reflecting on the present immediate and pragmatic benefits of persecution.

The following considerations do not constitute an exhaustive list, but they should make a case that persecution, though we intensely hate it, works for our immediate and future good.

Immediate feedback

■ Persecution provides immediate verification that we are coming out of the world.

Jesus assured his disciples: "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 . . . That is why the world hates you" (John 15:18-19).

"You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

Of course, Peter sets forth conditions for interpreting this unsavory feedback as evidence of God's favor. Murderers, thieves and even people with big mouths (and tiny brains) can ignite society's wrath (1 Peter 4:15). If we do suffer, we need to be sure we are suffering for quietly and patiently following Christ's example, and not merely for our own foolishness or lack of wisdom.

Personal responsibility

■ Persecution personalizes the battle against sin, making the struggle against Satan and his demonic influence more real to us.

When people place too much emphasis on a church organization, they can hide behind "My church teaches . . ." or "My church doesn't permit me to . . ." They can count on the minister having the appropriate legal paperwork to excuse them from this or that irksome obligation.

At one time my mother counseled me on the necessity of standing on my own and not yielding to peer pressure. She used an analogy of a tree standing alone in a meadow subject to all the meteorological elements. She contrasted the lonely tree to one in a large protected grove surrounded by hundreds or perhaps thousands of trees.

"Which tree," she asked, "would develop more resilience, strength, and resistance?"

The lone tree is always more resilient than the tree protected by the grove. This image has always remained in my consciousness.

Have we ever smugly said, "I suppose I could do something like that if my life depended upon it"?

When we hide or conceal ourselves in a large organization secure in its numbers and having no apparent problems, we seldom feel that our lives depend upon it. However, after the scattering of our fellowship, more and more people have become forced to act upon principle rather than a cushion supported by peer-pressure.

When the numbers were large the chances for persecution seemed more like the odds of winning the state lottery. Trials and persecutions were events that happened only to other people. But now, with a low profile and high visibility, our number comes up more frequently.

Standing on our own, armed only with godly principle, we take our turn in the trenches with a one-on-one combat with the power of evil. The apostle Paul reflects:

“For our struggle [even though it seems to come at the hands of people] is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

Stronger muscles

- Persecution forces us to commit to our beliefs.

Spiritual muscle unexercised becomes flaccid and weak. The apostle Paul suggests that “solid food is for the mature, who by constant use [or exercise] have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14).

Any upheaval in a church organization forces people to critically examine and put to the test many things they previously took for granted. The persecution from former friends within an organization creates a healthy struggle that helps people shore up their spiritual foundations and increase their learning.

I remember a cartoon of two scientists standing over a rat maze. One scientist, holding a large, hungry cat, remarks to the other scientist, “It is amazing how the learning ratio increases when we place the cat in the maze.”

Military bases routinely employ the services of professional penetrators whose sole purpose is to test the readiness and security of the defenses. Some probably remember the oriental man in the *Pink Panther* movies who constantly and unexpectedly tested the alertness of Inspector Clouseau. We need to regard our persecutors as professional penetrators sent by Almighty God to test the security of our spiritual defenses.

Showing courage

- Persecution enables us to embolden others to live godly lives courageously.

Cowardice is contagious, but genuine courage is even more contagious. The apostle Paul noticed a remarkable phenomenon when he suffered the humiliation of imprisonment. He marveled:

“Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly” (Philippians 1:14).

From time to time you may have the opportunity to see inspiring examples of people courageously falling on their swords for the truth, risking loss of livelihood and the accompanying public humiliation.

Years ago I observed a brave minister withstanding the insidious prevarications of his church headquarters. After finishing a sermon, he received a thunderous standing ovation. When the expected vicious retaliations came, a large number of the rank and file became emboldened to speak out publicly for the truth.

Revealing motives

- Persecution serves as a refining process, purifying and sifting out hidden motives.

When Peter admonished people to rejoice in their trials, he compared suffering to a refining process, a purifying faith “of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire” that “may be proved genuine” (1 Peter 1:7).

The same purification and refining metaphor appears in the Proverbs, suggesting that God requires a spiritual furnace to purify the heart.

“The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart” (Proverbs 17:3).

American writer Thomas Paine praised the effects of panic in refining character.

“. . . Yet panics, in some cases,” he wrote, “have their uses; they produce as much good as hurt. Their duration is always short; the mind grows through them, and acquires a firmer habit than before. But their peculiar advantage is that they are the touchstones of sincerity and hypocrisy, and brings things and men to light, which might otherwise have lain forever undiscovered . . . They sift out the hidden thoughts of man, and hold them up in public to the world” (*The American Crisis*).

Similarly Emily Dickinson, in discussing the value of pain and suffering, suggested:

“I like a look of agony / Because I know it’s true— / Men do not sham convulsion, / Nor simulate a throe—”

Persecution has the tendency to purge out falsehood and refine the truth. Paul describes a similar refining process, suggesting that divisions and conflicts are necessary to determine which “have God’s approval” (1 Corinthians 11:19).

Avoiding stagnation

- Persecution prevents spiritual stagnation.

The etymology of persecution comes from the Latin *persequi*: “to pursue,” synonymous with the Greek *dioka*, which means “to chase or to pursue.”

The act of persecution or harassment keeps the subject on the move, unable to rest on his laurels or become stagnant.

The apostle Paul totally understood the need for continually striving and keeping ahead of the pursuers, realizing that he had to forget what was behind and strain toward what was ahead, "pressing on toward the goal" (Philippians 3:13-14).

Certainly, if someone is pursuing us, intending to persecute or harass us, it is hard to stagnate or rest on our laurels. Truly, persecution has proved an effective and powerful motivator in overcoming.

Blessing of unity

- Persecution produces unity in the like-minded.

Nothing pulls families or nations together like persecution. An attack on one family member often abruptly puts to an end the most bitter and hostile sibling rivalry and forcefully unifies the entire family. Consider the intense national loyalty and unity demonstrated by the Serbs when bullied by the entire multinational NATO war machine.

When the bully Haman threatened the entire Jewish extended family, Esther, Mordecai and the entire house of Judah pulled together in unity.

Thinking of others

- Persecution increases our sensitivity to other people's misfortunes.

As Job suffered harassment from his three "friends," he was inspired to observe: "Men at ease have contempt for misfortune as the fate of those whose feet are slipping" (Job 12:5).

Conversely, people who suffer persecution develop compassion and sensitivity to others who are hurting and suffering.

Seeing the footsteps

- Persecution helps us identify with the spiritual giants who have gone through trials before us and, most of all, helps us identify with our Savior.

Hebrews 11:33-39 describes in detail some of the horrible things our forebears had to endure, and endured successfully. The apostle Peter reminded us that our Elder Brother Jesus Christ left us an example we should follow, adding that "when they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered He made no threats. Instead He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:21-23).

In all of these things, God promises that "He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13), adding that He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

The foregoing points constitute only a partial list of the values or benefits of persecution, but perhaps the purpose of persecution (the blessing's disguise) has become somewhat lifted.