

God's Word & Our Persecution

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[0 : 00] We have been looking at Psalm 119 about the Word of God and how the Word of God affects various areas of our lives.

One of the most difficult areas in human existence is the problem of suffering. Why is there evil? Where did evil come from? And why does God let bad things happen to good people and things like that? And it is a huge topic.

I used to think that either that there are no answers or that the answers are easy to find. Having studied scriptures a lot over the last 37 years, I was surprised to find out that the scriptures give us eight different answers to the problem of suffering.

I will not go through all eight of them. Not today, at least. Maybe another day. But I do want us to look at three issues in relationship to suffering and persecution.

[1 : 16] We are going to be focusing on persecution. Regrettably, I don't have just one passage to look at. I am going to look at four different passages. But I will warn you ahead of time.

But I will warn you ahead of time. And I really expect you to jot down those passages and think about them during this week. Reflect on them. Try to understand what scriptures are saying about this very difficult and ticklish issue.

So, we are going to look at this problem, the problem of suffering, but specifically within suffering, persecution.

Let's take a look at the first answer, the most common answer. It is so obvious that I almost want to apologize for telling you about it.

We all know it. So, here is the question. Why am I paying a speeding ticket? Well, the answer is obvious.

[2 : 19] I was driving, this is only an illustration. I was driving 85 miles in a 65-mile zone.

And the policeman decided to pull me to the side, slow me down, and give me a ticket. If I didn't drive fast, he wouldn't have given me a ticket. I drove fast.

I suffer the consequences of my actions. A results in B. If you plant bananas, you harvest bananas. If you plant oranges, you harvest oranges.

If you plant speeding, you harvest tickets. Why is this friend of mine paying a fine to the IRS?

Well, because he cheated on his income tax forms and didn't report some of the money that he had earned. He tried to hide it. Somehow or another, the IRS people caught him, and he is paying a fine.

[3 : 21] Again, sowing and reaping. What we sow, we harvest. You know, why was Dahmer thrown in jail for life?

That's many years ago, if you remember that incident. Well, because he killed people. He was a serial killer. And when you murder people like that, you pay the consequences of your actions.

To use the title of the great novel by Dostoevsky, it is Crime and Punishment. You commit this crime, you pay this punishment.

Or to use the biblical terminology, sowing and reaping. Or, if you want, the huge area in Deuteronomy, Deuteronomy 27, 28, blessings and curses.

If Israel, if God's people are faithful to him, he blesses them. If God's people are not faithful to him, he punishes them and he rebukes them and deals with them sternly.

[4 : 28] So, that is the first answer to why do we go through suffering. Because we are paying the consequences of our actions.

Crime and punishment. Now, I want us to move on to the second category. And I want us to stay some time here.

It is this. The answer is, I am going through suffering because I am doing the right thing. In the first answer, I am doing the wrong thing and God has punished me.

In the second category, I am doing the right thing and I am evoking opposition or resistance from the ungodly.

It is not that God is punishing me because I have sinned. It is the opposite. I am faithful to God and therefore God approves of me.

[5 : 29] But there is opposition in the world and I face the opposition of being faithful to God. So, one is the result of sinning. The second one is the result of the opposite. Faithfulness.

Now, I want to explain something to help you understand our culture at the present. Let me help you something.

In the West, in Western thought, we are going through a period of transition. This period has been going on for a long time. But it especially started to accelerate, historians tell us, around 1989.

1989 is the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is also the time when it seems like we are abandoning a system of thought called modernism that we were in for about 200 years.

Between 1789, the French Revolution, the fall of the Bastille, and 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, modernism dominated Western thought.

[6 : 32] We are now beyond modernism. Most of our children have been born in the era of post-modernism. Post-modernism tells us several things, many of which I disagree with.

Post-modernism tells us there are no absolutes. There is no absolute truth. There is relative truth. Truth for you or truth for me. But there is no absolute truth. And that since all views are equally acceptable, we should learn to tolerate each other.

So the only thing that we disapprove of is intolerance. Of course, I believe in tolerance. I don't just want to tolerate those who disagree with me.

Jesus tells me to go beyond tolerance. Jesus tells me not necessarily to tolerate their views, but to love them as my neighbor. But I reject the view that there are no absolutes and that there is truth for me and truth for you.

[7 : 47] And maybe they overlap. But in any case, we live in our own realms of truth. Let me just give you a silly example and then some serious examples.

Here is a silly example. Suppose I am driving and I am approaching a stop sign. And I notice in my peripheral vision that there is a policeman parking there.

But it is a stop sign. What should I do then? Should I just go through the stop sign and say, Truth is relative.

It is truth for you. But it is not truth for me. Am I going to do that? On a more serious note, there are things that are absolutely wrong.

Absolutely wrong. Not just absolutely wrong for Americans or absolutely wrong for Germans. The issue came up at the Nuremberg trial.

[8 : 56] What should we do with the fact that six million Jews were killed? What if German law said it's okay to kill Jews?

If that is legal in Germany, does it make it right? And the answer is no. That there are crimes against humanity.

And it doesn't matter what the U.S. law says. And it doesn't matter what German law says. And it doesn't matter what Japanese law says. These are crimes against humanity. These are absolutes. Certain things are wrong regardless of who holds that view. It is always wrong. It's wrong for everybody. It's universally. Not relatively, but absolutely universally.

Some of those is killing people. And of course, the worst example is Nazi Germany with six million Jews who were sent to concentration camps like Auschwitz and Dachau.

[9 : 56] But even before that, worse than Nazi Germany, believe it or not, is Stalin. Nobody knows. Nobody knows how many were killed.

Some numbers go as high as 30 million. Others go as high as 50 million. You may be familiar with Auschwitz and Dachau. But there are other massacres.

Babi Yar, if you're familiar with it. Shostakovich, the Russian composer, composed a symphony to mourn the horrible massacres in Russia, the Babi Yar massacre.

Sex trafficking is wrong. It's not just it's wrong in America. It's wrong. Kidnapping children and forcing them to fight in an army in tribal wars is wrong.

Hijacking a plane and blowing up in midair is wrong. Slavery is wrong. Whether we pass laws against slavery or whether we don't pass laws against slavery, there are certain things that are wrong.

[11 : 15] I remember a debate at UCLA between a philosopher who was a postmodern philosopher who was saying, there are no absolutes. Truth is true for me and truth for you is for you.

But there are no absolutes. And a Christian educator from the education department. And the philosophy professor kept saying, there are no absolutes.

There are no absolutes. It's just relative. And then the Christian professor put him on the spot. He really had him squirming.

He said to him, if there are no absolutes, if what is right or wrong depends on me, if it's right for me, is it okay if I rape your wife and molest your daughter?

That was a public debate. Is it okay? If truth is relative and according to my set of values, is it okay if I rape your wife and molest your daughter?

[12 : 21] If the philosopher said, yes, it's okay, I'd love to hear the conversation home between him and his wife in the car. If he said, it's okay to molest women, you can imagine what the woman student body at UCLA would have done.

They would have him fired the next day. Because here's a professor who's saying, it's okay to molest women. So there are absolutes. The point is, suppose I recognize there are absolutes, what should I do about it?

Knowing what is right and what's wrong puts me in a difficult point where I have to make a decision. What should I do about this? There's a wonderful movie called Schindler's List about Spielberg. About concentration camps and the killing of Jews. The movie is in black and white. It's completely black and white.

This is rather odd because we've had colored movies ever since, you know, the early 30s. But this movie is in black and white. Spielberg decided to make it black and white.

[13 : 41] Except for one scene, there is a girl who is wearing a red coat. And so in a movie that's totally black and white, you see this little girl wearing a red coat.

That's the only time he uses color. And so when critics asked, movie critics asked Spielberg, why did you allow, why did you shoot that scene like that?

He said, because there were so many Germans who said, we didn't know, we didn't see, we weren't aware of it. We didn't realize that that was going on. And Spielberg says, how can you say that you were living in that culture and you didn't know what was going on?

How could you see my movie and not notice the red girl? So it was his way of saying, if we know that there is something wrong, we cannot turn our face in the other direction and pretend it doesn't exist.

We must do what is right within whatever our powers is. And the third part of it is that when we do, when we try to do what is right, we will face opposition.

[14 : 55] Sometimes the majority will not automatically agree with the minority and say you're right and will champion your cause. Sometimes the majority opposes the minority.

And if you want a wonderful but morbid, at the same time, book, read Fox's Book of Martyrs. A record of one martyr after the other who stood up for what is right and got himself killed.

James was beheaded. Peter was thrown in jail. Paul was chained and thrown in jail. Many times later on, Peter was crucified upside down.

Paul was beheaded in Rome. If you stand for the truth, sometimes you face problems. Wilberforce is known for fighting slavery and causing slavery to be abolished in England.

But he didn't do it in one day. He fought against it for 30 years. And many think that when William Pitt, his best friend, ceased to be the prime minister of England, many thought that Wilberforce would become the next prime minister of England.

[16 : 11] But he had developed so many enemies in parliament for standing against slavery when many didn't want slavery, that they wouldn't accept him as prime minister.

So he lost the opportunity to be prime minister for the sake of championing the slavery cause. But he didn't regret it for a minute. He didn't regret it. It was doing the right thing.

So, you have to accept the fact that we will face opposition. I told you what my favorite passage in scriptures is.

Cursed be the day that I was born. If you don't think I'm weird, I'll tell you what my favorite promise in the Bible. My students ask me, are you standing on the promises of God?

And I say, of course I'm standing on the promises of God. What's your favorite promise? You don't want to know. Yes, tell us. Maybe it'll be my favorite promise as well. You know what's my favorite promise in the scriptures?

[17:11] In the world, you will have tribulations. So, I'm expecting tribulations. Sometimes I receive it, sometimes more often I dish it out.

But in the world, you will have tribulations. Look at this wonderful passage. Please turn with me to Romans chapter 8.

Romans chapter 8 has got to be one of my most favorite passages because it was the passage that impacted my life deeply. It's the passage that starts, who can separate us from the love of God?

And concludes with, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Those of us who like to be loved, that's a great passage, especially to be loved by God. Look at verse 35.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?

[18:21] As it is written, verse 36, please pay attention to verse 36.

For your sake, we face death all day long. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

Why do we face death? Why do we face sword? Why do we face hunger? Why do we face all these things that he lists? Notice the answer. For your sake.

Because of my commitment to Christ, I am experiencing these things. For your sake.

Jot down this verse. Take it and reflect on it. Romans 8, 35 and 36. For your sake, we face death all day long. I want to take this idea and take it to a higher level.

[19:35] And I want to share with you something that you may or may not have thought about, but it is really important to think about in the light of suffering and persecution. Turn to Philippians 3, 10.

It's a familiar verse. Philippians 3, 10. Philippians 3, 10. Paul expresses his desires about his relationship with Christ.

And then in verse 10 he says, I want to know him. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. The power of his resurrection would be fun.

I mean, I'd like to experience that. It would be fun to walk on water. I wonder what the people on the beach would think, you know, walking on water. I'd like to go through this wall without, you know, dematerializing and materializing or whatever happens when you go through the wall.

That would be fun. I'd like to feed 5,000 with nothing. That's part of his resurrection. But he doesn't stop there. I want you to read the rest of this verse.

[20:54] Philippians 3, 10. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. And now comes the bad news. The fellowship of sharing in his suffering.

I want to share in the fellowship of his suffering. Suffering. This may sound too abstract.

Let me give you three examples from the Old Testament that will help you understand that. We're going to look at Moses, Abraham, and Hosea. Three examples about participating in the fellowship of God's suffering.

I want to begin with Moses. What I'm going to say is so interesting that I want you to see it yourself. Take a look at Hebrews chapter 11, which is saying something about Moses.

Please turn to Hebrews 11, verse 24. Hebrews 11, 24.

[22:05] By faith, Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short while.

Moses is making the most important decision of his life. Who am I? Where do I want to belong? Am I part of Egyptian culture? Or am I part of Jewish culture?

If I choose to be in Egypt, I can be prince. I am the son of Pharaoh's daughter. And who knows? If my brother dies, maybe I'll become the next Pharaoh.

So he's got potential. He's got power. He has position. He has wealth. He has armies. He has everything. On the other hand, if he chooses to be a Jew, he will suffer.

And facing these two decisions, great wealth or great suffering, to my great surprise, he chooses suffering over wealth.

[23:10] Who in his right mind would do that? If one of my students said that to me, I'd yell at him. But why? Why on earth did he choose that?

Looking at 11, 24 again. By faith, Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasure of sin for a short while.

Look at verse 26. If that's not a fabulous verse, I don't know what a fabulous verse looks like. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.

Why am I going to choose this? For the disgrace of Christ. How much he knew about Christ? How much he knew about the disgrace of Christ? I'll have to ask him in heaven.

But he knew enough to make the most important decision based on the disgrace of Christ. Think about that. Keeping that in mind, I want you to turn to Exodus chapter 32.

[24 : 25] A passage that you may or may not know. But it is a wonderful passage. One of the finest passages about understanding, having fellowship with suffering.

The power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering. Exodus chapter 32. This is after the episode of the golden calf.

God had told them in the Ten Commandments, you shall have no other gods before me. Don't make an image. Don't worship it. They ignored all three commandments. And they decided to worship this image that they made.

And of course, it was a terrible thing. And Moses decides to try to plead on their behalf. To try to talk to God and ask God if God would consider forgiving them.

And so in chapter 32, verse 30, look at this. 32, 30. The next day, Exodus 32, 30.

[25 : 34] Please turn to it. The next day, Moses said to the people, you have committed a great sin, but now I will go to the Lord. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.

The word there is very important. Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin. So Moses went back to the Lord and said, oh, what a great sin these people have committed.

They have made themselves God of gold. But now, please forgive them. Please forgive their sins.

But if not, if you're not willing to forgive their sins, then blot me out of the book you have written.

Blot me out from the book that you have written. Moses did not worship the golden calf. Moses was not involved in the golden calf. Moses did not participate with the golden calf.

Moses was against the golden calf. But he is asking God to forgive them. And if God says, no, this sin is too terrible, I can't forgive them.

[26 : 45] Moses says, can I give you another option? Blot me out of the book of life. Why is he saying that? What did he want to do? Make atonement.

So think now with me just for a second. We have an innocent man who loves his people and they have sinned and alienated from God.

So he wants to make atonement for them. And in the process of making atonement, he offers his own life. Where else will we see that?

At that moment, what is Moses participating in? And I don't know how much he knows about it. But he did make the most important decision based on the suffering of Christ.

Moses, in many ways, is like Jesus. As Jesus goes to the cross in a very much smaller way, Moses is willing to make atonement.

[27 : 45] Moses is experiencing something that Jesus will experience on a much grander scale.

Let's look at Abraham.

Genesis 22. Sometime later, Genesis 22. This is the sacrifice of Isaac. Sometime later, God tested Abraham.

He said to him, Abraham, here I am. He replied, then God said, take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering.

Take your son, your only son, the one that you love, and offer him as a sacrifice. Do you remember what the voice said at Jesus' baptism?

baptism, this is my beloved son in whom I am pleased. And the voice at the baptism, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, this is my beloved son in whom I am pleased.

[29 : 01] And then at John 3.16, God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, his only begotten son, the one he loves. where is that quoting from?

It's quoting from Genesis 22. Abraham loves the son, but he is going to offer him, the only one, the one that he loves, he is going to offer him as a sacrifice.

And guess what the father is going to do on the cross? Offer his son, his only son, the one that he loves, and going to offer him as a sacrifice. I don't know how much Abraham understood that his

actions will in many ways mirror or echo or anticipate or are forerunners, a preview of the cross. And then let's take a look at Hosea. God tells him, take a woman of adultery, the Hebrew is very difficult, it's hard to know how to translate it.

It means either that she was a prostitute when he married her or immediately became a prostitute after he married her. But he marries this woman and she betrays him, she cheats on him, she runs after other men, she chases her lovers, she is not faithful to him, and he is having a very horrible married life.

[30 : 32] But God asked Hosea that in order to help him, if you look the first three chapters in Hosea, because as he experiences this unfaithful wife, this adultery, this betrayal, this lack of faithfulness, he realizes that God too is married to Israel, and God is going through the same thing.

Israel doesn't love him, Israel is unfaithful, Israel is betraying him, Israel is chasing other gods, Israel is not following her husband.

So Hosea is experiencing what God is experiencing, Abraham is experiencing what the father will do at the cross, Moses is experiencing what Jesus will do.

So when he says that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering, it means on rare occasions, rare, on rare occasions, God will open his private emotional life, he will open a window and let us look in.

God will allow us to see what he is going through. so God wants us to be his friends, part of friendship is not just to show what is good, but also the other side.

[32 : 08] The power of the resurrection, the fellowship of his suffering. So as I suffer for Christ, I don't say, oh how terrible, I say hallelujah, praise God, the Lord thinks I should experience persecution for the sake of Christ.

When they came to arrest Polycarp, who was about 95, Polycarp was John's disciple, he was about 95 years old, and they didn't want to arrest him, I mean, he was known for being so godly and wonderful, and they said, please, deny, deny Jesus, even if you don't mean it, just say it, so we can let you go.

And Polycarp says, I've served him for all these years, faithfully, and now you do want me to deny him in one sentence? And then he said, it's an honor to die like Jesus.

It's an honor. It's an honor. So why do we go through hardships? Sometimes because we bring it on ourselves. We commit crimes, we suffer the consequences.

Why do we go through hardships? Because we stand for what is right and are willing to face opposition from those who disagree with us while loving them, not while hating them, loving them, loving them.

[33 : 38] And thirdly, we go through suffering because God on occasion says, I want to have a deeper relationship with you. I want you to see my private life.

And that, I think, is just a wonderful honor. Let me pray for you. Lord Father, thank you for this congregation.

Thank you for my brothers and sisters. Thank you for how you're working in all of our lives. I pray that we would love you and love our neighbors.

help us to be faithful to you, whether it's easy or difficult, whether we are blessed or persecuted.

Help us to be faithful to you and to appreciate you. I ask these things both for myself and the congregation. In Jesus' name, amen.