

• *Christians are the most persecuted people in the world*

1. God may put us through very perplexing sufferings

• *Five kinds of persecution have been mentioned – now eight more*

(i) *There is no sweet reasonableness in unbelief*

(ii) *The greatness of the sufferings of God's people sharply divides the world and the people of God*

(iii) *The greatness of the sufferings of God's people is what reveals their true character*

• *No easy answer to the problem of suffering – we have to wait for the answer*

• *Meanwhile we trust God*

Christians are the most persecuted people in the world. Even today there are places in the world where God's people endure the most terrible sufferings. There is nothing new about it. All of God's people are likely in one way or another to face great tribulation. Jesus said, 'In the world you will have tribulation'¹. Hebrews 11:37 continues the list of terrible persecutions that people of faith have had to endure.

1. **God may put us through very perplexing sufferings.** ³⁷*They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, tormented, mistreated – ³⁸the world was not worthy of them. They wandered about in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.* We have already had five kinds of persecution in Hebrews 11:35–36: torture, mockery, flogging, restraint in chains, imprisonment. Now there are eight more: stoning (perhaps our writer remembered the stories of Stephen and Paul¹, sawing into two (a case is mentioned in Susanna: 'the angel of God waits with the sword to cut you in two'², and in Jewish tradition Isaiah was said to have been killed in this way in the days of Manasseh). There was death by sword (we recall Elijah's complaint³) and being forced to be constantly on the move (as happened to David and to Jesus) in clothing that showed poverty. Then there is mention of destitution, affliction, torment, ill-treatment. The persecuted people of God often have to live in the most distressing places: deserts and mountains, caves and holes in the ground.

There are some obvious comments which we must make on all of this. (i) **There is no sweet reasonableness in unbelief.** It all goes to show that opposition to the gospel is not driven by logic or intelligence but by malice. How often the world wants to give its nice logical reasons for not believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. But the truth is the reason is malice. The way in which the world treats the people of God is proof. They do not dissent in a loving manner. Rather they react with hatred and resolve to do what they can to banish these Christians altogether. It is this spirit that leads to the persecution of Christians in many parts of the world today.

(ii) **The greatness of the sufferings of God's people sharply divides the world and the people of God.** 'The world was not worthy of them', says verse 38. It means that it was a privilege for the world to have such people around but men and women do not deserve the privilege!

(iii) **The greatness of the sufferings of God's people is what reveals their true character.** What I mean is this. The great problem confronting anyone who wants to believe in the God of the Bible is the problem of evil and of sin and of suffering. Why does God ever allow the kind of things mentioned in Hebrews 11:35–38? There is really no completely satisfying answer to the question. One can say a few things (man's sin is the cause of much of the suffering; God made human beings with a certain amount of freedom without which they would be robots). But none of the answers really are completely satisfying. We have to **wait** for the answer which will appear at the judgement seat of Christ. But meanwhile a Christian is a person who **trusts** God and accepts God's right to use us in whatever way he wishes. Why does God put his people through the experiences of Hebrews 11:35–38? I do not know! But I do know that the answer will appear at the end of history; meanwhile such experiences are the greatest possible invitation to trust God no matter what happens to us (something 'the Hebrews'

¹ John 16:33

¹ Acts 7:57–58;
14:19

² Susanna 59

³ 1 Kings 19:10

trust God

• *Our sympathetic high priest will sooner or later balance our sufferings with compensations and joys*

• *It gives scope for love*

• *In one sense faith receives the promises now*

• *In another sense we are working for the future*

• *When the time comes for the final glory to be revealed all God's people will enter into their inheritance together*

• *Both Old and New Testament saints*

needed to know); and the sympathetic high priest our Lord Jesus Christ will sooner or later balance our sufferings with compensations and joys which enable us to cope; and if we do learn to cope the final reward will be great. 'Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you'^{¶1}. It gives scope for love. 'But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil'^{¶2}.

The final glory is yet to come! This is the point of verses 39–40. ³⁹And all these people, although they received a good commendation, through their faith, nevertheless did not receive what was promised. ⁴⁰God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect. In one sense faith receives the promises now; in another sense we are working for the future. The final fulfilment of generations of believers who have lived in faith is the day when we shall all enter into final rejoicing together. What a day it will be! The day when the heavenly Jerusalem comes down upon planet earth. 'I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God'^{¶1}. The day when God's people will be raised in glory and fully compensated for all troubles and trials, rewarded for all victories over temptation, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. The heroes of faith 'entered into rest'; they received the assurance of reward. But even still they were each one 'looking forward to the city that has foundations'^{¶2}. When the time comes for the final glory to be revealed all God's people will enter into their inheritance together. The temple of God – the church – will be fully built and will become more than ever a dwelling-place of God. The heavenly Jerusalem was prepared not only for Old Testament saints but for the saints of the new covenant also. The saints of the Old Testament could not fully get to their final inheritance – the resurrection glory – until the new covenant had run its course.

Note

a. There are fifteen books that are sometimes called 'the Apocrypha'. Twelve of them (also sometimes called 'the Apocrypha' but in a narrower usage) are regarded as Scripture by Roman Catholics but not by Bible-believing Protestant Christians. They are (i) Baruch and (ii) the Letter of Jeremiah (sometimes combined into one book), (iii) Additions to Esther, (iv) the Prayer of Azariah (or Song of Three Holy Children) – inserted between the Hebrew of Daniel 3:23 and 24, (v) Susanna – placed at the end of the book of Daniel; (vi) Bel and the Dragon also attached as an end to Daniel. Then there are (vii) Wisdom of Solomon, (viii) Ecclesiasticus, (ix) Tobit, (x) Judith, (xi) 1 Maccabees, (xii) 2 Maccabees. The other three are not accepted as Scripture by anyone (1 Esdras and 2 Esdras – called 3 and 4 Esdras by Roman Catholics; and the Prayer of Manasseh).

¶1 Matthew 5:12

¶2 Luke 6:35

¶1 Revelation 21:2

¶2 11:10



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