



THE CLASH OF

LIGHT

BURNING

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## The field on which the Christian life unfolds is not a playground but a battlefield. The Bible clearly describes the clash that disciples of Jesus will have with the world.

Christianity could be described in a variety of ways, but its most sober description would be that of a blood-stained field of war. This particular war has been raging for centuries, replete with battle after battle to the death. The casualty list is staggering, but the victories have been sweet. Viewed from a physical vantage point, the participants in the war are humans. Seen from a spiritual perspective, the participants also include Satan and his angels (the demons), and God's heavenly host of angelic warriors.

Numerous biblical passages describe this intense clash of light and darkness in terms of warfare. Two of the more notable are Ephesians 6:10-18 and Revelation 12:1-12. One of the most intriguing passages along these lines is Daniel 10. Here we learn that Daniel had gone on a three-week fast before God. At the end of the fast, an angelic messenger came to him with a message from God regarding the future. But before giving the message, the messenger explained why he had been unable to come sooner. He had been engaged in a battle with the prince of the Persian kingdom and could not leave until Michael the archangel came to relieve him. Without question, a daily spiritual battle of gigantic proportions is being fought and, in some way, all beings are participants!

Such a depiction of Christianity probably seems bizarre and unreal to most people, even to those who claim an adherence to the Christian faith. This reaction shows how very little the Bible has been studied and followed, and how very much Satan has blinded people's minds to the spiritual realities all around them. When we see life as it truly is, and when we live life as God designed it to be lived, the clash of light and darkness is inevitable. As individuals, we battle darkness deep in our own souls. As members of society, we battle darkness in relationship to others. In the latter instance, the battle must ultimately take the form of persecution. As Paul put it, "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Light and darkness can never peacefully co-exist. Therefore, no one can escape participation in the war, although surrendering easily to darkness

seems at first to be an escape. Living in darkness is easier in some ways initially, because it is the path of least resistance and the path of majority opinion. But the long-range consequences in both time and eternity are grim indeed. Fighting on the side of light is far more intense in the short run, but rewarding beyond human comprehension in the long run.

Since disciples of Christ have made a lifetime commitment to the cause of light, we must understand well this war as it takes the form of persecution. As always, to be forewarned is to be fore-armed. We cannot afford to be ignorant of Satan's devices.

### The Warning of Persecution

Jesus was always a realist. As such, he warned his followers about persecution in no uncertain terms. He did not want anyone to volunteer to be in his family without the clear understanding that they were also volunteering to fight in his army. In Matthew 10:16-39, he warned his early disciples that they would be hated and killed possibly by their own families. He promised not peace, but a sword; not ease, but a cross. And this passage makes it plain that such sober consequences await all followers for all time. No one can be a Christian unless he is willing to fight the good fight of faith in a world of darkness.

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Then in John 15:18-16:2, Jesus further explains the absolute inevitability of 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. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:18-20).

Jesus goes on to make it clear that we must be warned of this persecution in advance, or our faith will be shaken when it occurs. Persecution, especially from loved ones, is painful business. But we must have our minds and hearts set for the battle, or else we will be captured and destroyed.

### The Progression of Persecution

Persecution is not only inevitable; it follows a certain progression. Jesus himself was widely accepted and acclaimed in the early stages of his ministry, but his life and teaching ultimately prompted those in darkness to kill him. Similarly, the early church experienced an early acceptance (Acts 2:46-47, 5:12-16) which was followed by a worsening rejection. The persecution began with the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 4:16-20, 5:27-29, 40-42). The next step was the martyrdom of a Christian leader (Acts 7). This shocking event produced a widespread persecution of all disciples in Jerusalem, causing them to leave the city and thus spread the faith to other places (Acts 8:1-4). As the word spread, the persecution necessarily spread to other parts of the world as a result (Acts 13:44-52, 14:1-7, 10-20, 17:5-8, etc.). The persecution eventually progressed until the Jewish leaders in far-away Rome said, "we know that people everywhere are talking against the sect" (Acts 28:22).

When disciples today are accused of being in a *cult*, they find themselves in very good company! Darkness has never been gracious in describing light. And while those around us may be impressed initially with our changes, their early favor may soon give way to strong rejection. Our life will either move them closer to light or farther into darkness. The entrance of light into a dark place either attracts or repels. Deep down, no one remains neutral forever (John 3:19-21).

### The Causes of Persecution

It is significant that Jesus' warnings of persecution in John 15:18ff were preceded by an agricultural portrayal of the Great Commission (vs. 1-17). In other words, persecution is prompted by evangelism. When a person becomes a disciple, a few people may be moved by his or her life changes. But many people will become

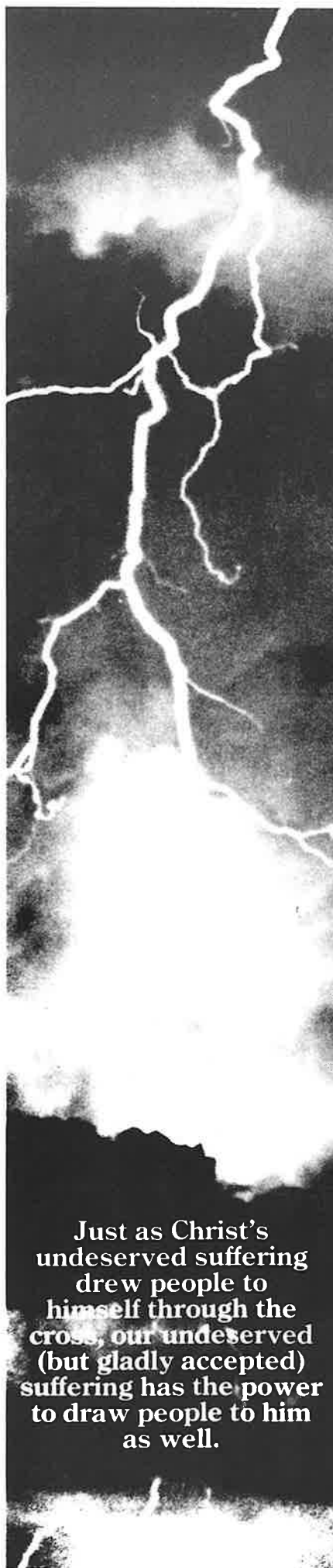
disturbed by what God wants in their lives. The obvious reason for a lack of persecution toward most Christian-oriented groups is because they are not speaking the word! Bottom line, the ultimate general cause of persecution is evangelism. However, some specific causes are described in the Bible, as well.

First, the gospel threatens family ties (Matthew 10:34-37). As painful as this type of persecution may be, it is also quite common. Even Jesus, who committed no sins and made no mistakes, was persecuted by his family. They were embarrassed by him to the point of saying, "He is out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). When they came to get him, he did not compromise one iota. In fact, when told that his mother and brothers had come for him, he replied to the group he was teaching: "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:34-35). Obviously, he viewed spiritual ties as more important than physical ones. His strong stand for truth ultimately resulted in the conversion of his family. But their relationships were likely quite strained and uncomfortable until they "saw the light."

Second, the gospel threatens false teachers and false teaching (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 2 Timothy 4:2-4). Keep in mind that religious leaders were the ones most aroused by Jesus and the early church teaching the truth. Religious traditions are usually held to be more sacred than the Bible itself by most religious people even though they would not admit it. Such leaders are jealous of their positions, and their followers are generally threatened by the thought that they might be wrong.

Third, the gospel threatens business ventures and finances (Acts 19:23-34). Nothing is ordinarily quite so close to the heart as the pocketbook! Therefore, when jobs or financial considerations are on the line, people do get upset. It comes as no surprise that economic discrimination is a common avenue of persecution (Revelation 13:16-17).

Fourth, the gospel threatens the practice of worldly pleasures (1 Peter 4:3-4). According to this passage, worldly people, "think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse upon you." Our refusal to participate in worldly activities poses a threat to worldliness in others, but our speaking up about why we do not participate poses a greater threat.



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## Our Reaction to Persecution

A godly reaction to persecution must encompass our heart attitudes as well as our actions. Regarding attitudes, Peter tells us not to be surprised when such trials come, as if something strange or unusual was happening (1 Peter 4:12-16). The writer of Hebrews encourages us to set our eyes on Jesus, and to realize that it could be worse—we have not yet shed our blood (Hebrews 12:1-4)! But these attitudes toward suffering are not simply to be an absence of malice; they should in fact be positive.

Just as Christ's *undeserved* suffering drew people to him through the cross, our undeserved (but gladly accepted) suffering has the power to draw people to him as well (2 Corinthians 4:8-12, Colossians 1:24, 1 Peter 2:11-12). Finally, we should actually *rejoice* when persecuted because God has promised us great rewards in heaven (Matthew 5:10-12).

Our *actions* in response to persecution are well described in 1 Peter 3:13-17. First do not give in to fear (v. 14). Second, continue to make Jesus the Lord of your life and to share your faith boldly (v. 15—see also Revelation 12:11). Third, keep being gentle and respectful toward those who persecute you (v. 16—see also Romans 12:17-21). Fourth, make sure you are suffering for doing good rather than suffering for some sin in your own life (v. 17).

In conclusion, we simply must keep trusting God and obeying what he said (v. 10). The more our zeal for him results in pulling people out of Satan's kingdom, the more Satan will stir up opposition to us. Neither persecution nor fear of persecution can be allowed to move our focus off of winning the world for Christ. Remember his words in Luke 6:26: "woe to you when all men speak well of you."

We cannot afford to *prompt* criticism by having ungodly attitudes or actions toward our persecutors, nor can we back down from truth in order to *avoid* criticism. Our approach must include godly living and a total determination to assault Satan's dark kingdom to rescue souls taken captive by him, and to trust God for the final outcome. Light and darkness *must* clash, and true disciples must have the heart to do far more than endure the clash—rather, they must run to the fight! It is God's way! **D**