

Articles and Sermons :: George Wood: Persecution Is Coming to American Christians

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"You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations" (Mark 13:9-10).

In Jesus' discourse on the future, He gave four indicators or signs of what would happen between His first and second coming: division in religion (vv. 5, 6), societal and social conflict (vv. 7-8a), and environmental disasters (v.8b).

But He spent the most time talking about the fourth indicator: trouble for disciples (vv. 9-25). At the beginning of His ministry, He had invited them to "Come and see" (John 1:39). Earlier and here near the end (8:34-38), He invites them and us to "Come and die."

In North America and in other places, we may have a skewed understanding of following Jesus. Some tell us that if only we give our money to ministry or have faith, then nothing ill will happen to us. We are falsely promised health and wealth.

That's not the experience of millions of Christ-followers across the globe. We know, for example, that Christians are the single most persecuted group in the world. Not only are Christians denied civil rights, but they are hunted down, burned, pillaged, imprisoned, tortured, and executed.

Jesus stated in verses 7 and 8 that the persecution for first-century disciples would begin from religious people (synagogues) and political leaders (governors and kings).

In the book of Acts, we read about both types of persecution. However, it would be dishonest not to note that so-called organized Christianity more than made up for any suffering of the early believers through the relentless and shameful persecution of the Jews. Jesus never wanted the victimization of the Jews to occur. Better to be persecuted than to persecute.

These same two types of opposition—religious and political—happen today with increasing velocity. We only have to look to countries that have made it a crime to evangelize and to convert. The punishment could be imprisonment or death.

Even in America and the West, we see the opposition from these two sources. See what is happening in our culture to those who believe that Jesus is the exclusive means of salvation and in His teachings on morality. You need only look at the efforts to erase all references to Christ from the public market place as evidence. If that is not enough, then look at how the entertainment industry, the media, and even major sectors of the government seek to isolate Christ-followers by branding them as intolerant, not progressive, and even hateful.

There is a ramped up persecution coming to American Christians, and it is just over the horizon. Jesus knew that persecution would happen to His first followers and to us His latest followers. He regards such activity as normative rather than exceptional.

However, there is one positive indicator: "The gospel must first be preached to all nations." That's the one hopeful sign amid all the negative indicators about the course of the age. Despite all the adversities and calamities, the good news of Jesus will be proclaimed to all ethnic groups. Jesus clearly saw that His story would reach beyond the narrow perimeters of Galilee and Judea—that it would touch the whole world!

So ... for now, trouble ... but at the end, triumph!