

Pauline Perspectives on Persecution

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, October 2023

Abstract

This article examines Paul's view of persecution of believers for their faith. Three particular elements will be explored. First, Paul sees persecution as something negative that believers can rightly pray against, but also as a necessary aspect of Christian life and one that can actually have gospel benefits. Second, Paul sees solidarity as a crucial element of persecution, as believers who are persecuted enter into solidarity with Christ. Third, Paul sometimes reinterprets general suffering as persecution. The article also draws out implications for the global Church today.

Key Words: missions, New Testament, Paul, persecution, suffering

Introduction

Given the practical relevance of biblical perspectives on persecution, it is surprising that they are not discussed more. By some counts, global persecution of Christianity is at a record high. For those experiencing persecution, a biblical perspective is obviously vital. The New Testament speaks directly to the issue of Christian persecution, proving much needed guidance and encouragement.

Moreover, for at least three reasons such perspectives are also relevant to those of us who live in the United States and other settings where persecution is rare. First, biblical perspectives on persecution aid us in praying for the persecuted Church, as we seek to pray "as if we were there in jail with them," as Hebrews puts it (Hebrews 13:3). Second, we can receive guidance in interpreting growing opposition to Christianity in our own contexts. The third reason is that such perspectives help us with the question of how to think about how our contexts are very different from that of the earliest Christians.

In addition, in the West there is less and less acceptance of the Christian worldview. Some have interpreted this increased disavowal of Christianity as a return to normal. Some Western Christians have bemoaned and perhaps exaggerated their decreasing acceptance by their societies, prompting some to say Christians have a "persecution complex" (Castelli, 2008; sometimes colloquially referred to as a "persecution fetish"). There has even been a recent interest in theonomy as a potential solution to the growing divide between culture and Christianity. (For a review of some of the movements, see Carter, 2023.) As one author has put it, Americans do not know very well how to suffer, and learning how is a pressing issue (Lutjens, 2007, p. ix.). A biblical perspective on persecution can aid in navigating these issues.

This article limits its analysis to Paul's writings on suffering related to persecution for one's belief in Christ. (For the issue of the authorship of the Pauline epistles, see Andersen, 2016 and Capes, 2024. Davey, 2019, provides an overview of the study of suffering in Paul.) Granted it is sometimes difficult to differentiate whether suffering in general or suffering due to persecution is being discussed in a New Testament passage; and, the differentiation itself is somewhat of an external imposition on the text. Even so, there does seem to be some differentiation of the two within the New Testament, for instance in 1 Peter which differentiates between suffering for doing evil and suffering for doing good, and as a Christian (1 Peter 3:17-18, 4:15-16).

The ensuing discussion examines four elements of Paul's perspective on persecution: it is negative yet necessary, it is beneficial for the gospel, persecution provides solidarity, and general suffering can be interpreted as persecution.

Negative Yet Necessary

While it may seem to be an obvious point, it is important to note that Paul desires that persecution would not occur. Before examining Paul's various other interpretations of persecution, including what might be termed his "positive" views, it is vital to understand that Paul was not a masochist (contra Prokhorov, 2013, pp. 172-188) and desired that missionaries could work without threat of persecution.

Paul asks the Thessalonians to pray for him that the word of the Lord would go forth and that he be delivered from wicked and evil men (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2). Paul asks the Romans to join him in praying that he be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea (Romans 15:30-31). Paul wants to be delivered not just for the sake of deliverance itself but for the sake of the gospel mission (Schreiner, 1998, p. 782).

In 1 Timothy, Paul writes to Timothy for the purpose of explaining how one is to "behave in the household of God" (1 Timothy 3:14-15). That which the Church is to do "first of all" is pray for "all people" and "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-4). The Church's first priority is to pray against persecution and for the spread of the Gospel. Lack of persecution is desirable because it gives believers the freedom to share the gospel. In my own context in the United States, I hear many exhortations to pray for our country, including its leaders. Certainly, such prayers fulfill Paul's command in part, but Paul's emphasis is for believers to pray for the Church generally, especially the persecuted Church, and for all of the political and societal leaders where the worldwide Church lives and serves.

Additional support for the idea that lack of persecution is positive can be seen in 1 Corinthians 4:8-11, where Paul contrasts the prideful and at-ease Corinthians with his own suffering state:

You are already full! You are already rich! You have begun to reign as kings without us – and I wish you did reign, so that we could also reign with you! For I think God has displayed us, the apostles in last place, like men condemned to die...we are fools in Christ, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! Up to the present hour we are...roughly treated....

While the passage is full of irony, and while Paul rebukes the Corinthians for the way their situation has led to pride, Paul does not suggest that the Corinthians begin to experience suffering.

It did not take long for some in the Early Church to take New Testament exhortations to steadfastness in suffering to the extreme of masochism (Prokhorov, 2013, points to the writings of Justin Martyr and Polycarp). Ignatius of Antioch (1st-2nd century) writes to the Ephesians of how he is "hoping that I might, thanks to your prayer, obtain the favor of fighting wild beasts at Rome and through this favor be able to become a disciple" (Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians 1:2, my translation of Lightfoot, 1992). Nevertheless, this masochistic idea is absent from Paul. Paul can speak of the glory that comes after and even through suffering, but that glory is desirable *precisely* because it brings an end to suffering (Schreiner, 1998, p. 255).

At the same time, Paul was no stranger to persecution. Paul's very body, scarred and marred as it was, would have been a constant reminder to himself and others of persecution (see for example 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, Galatians 6:17). That he prays for deliverance from persecution in the passages above implies that it is already happening. And in each of these texts Paul's strategy for avoiding persecution is prayer, not defiance of government or taking up arms. Paul wanted to pray against persecution for the sake of freedom in sharing the gospel. But he also saw it as in some sense inevitable. To give one example, 2 Timothy 3:12 he states clearly, "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (For a contemporary application, see Sookhdeo, 2005). Thus there is a real tension here. Paul accepted the unavoidable reality of persecution, but he saw it as negative and that it was legitimate to pray against it.

Gospel Benefits of Persecution

Paul thus desired a lack of persecution for the sake of freedom to share the gospel. However, when faced with persecution Paul interpreted it through the gospel—and saw his circumstances as beneficial for the gospel in a way that was not simply negative. This interpretive stance exemplifies the clear importance of the gospel in Paul's thought, particularly for how he could view diverse and even opposing scenarios through that same gospel: lack of persecution is beneficial for the gospel, but persecution can also be beneficial for the gospel.

Paul notes in Philippians that his imprisonment has led to opportunities to witness to the imperial guard in whose path he has been placed (Philippians 1:12). He also notes that some afflict him by preaching the gospel for the sake of rivalry and competition with him, but that he simply rejoices that the gospel is being preached (Philippians 1:15-18).

In 2 Corinthians 4 Paul argues that his suffering actually gives people a picture of the gospel. The resurrection life of Christ is a treasure, and that treasure is located "in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (4:7). Gaffin writes, "It is in the suffering of believers in the mortal body that resurrection life of Jesus is manifested (not alongside, or in addition to or in spite of, but in)" (Gaffin, 2022, p. 404). Gaffin also points out in this passage an "important missiological principle," namely "The gospel at work in the church with its life-in-death implications of suffering and sacrificial giving of self—sacrificial suffering in the giving of self—is a decidedly effective means of bringing others into the church and under the saving and life-giving dominion of the Lord (Gaffin, 2022, p. 404)." Hafemann argues that in this passage Paul sees his suffering as proving the legitimacy of his gospel ministry to others (Hafemann, 2000).

Solidarity

Another recurring element in Paul's conception of persecution and suffering is that of solidarity. By solidarity we here mean simply shared experience. Though similar to the idea of "union with Christ," we here use a broader term in attempt to avoid reducing diverse pictures of shared experience into one picture, with a highly specific theological interpretation. In Romans 8:18, Paul states that the sufferings of the present time are not to be compared with the future glory that is to be revealed. That the suffering discussed in Romans includes persecution is clear from 8:35 where Paul mentions "persecution" and "the sword." As support for his claim that the future glory is greater than the present suffering, Paul introduces the idea of creation's solidarity with persecuted Christians. The future glory is so great that even creation longs for it. "All creation" longs for the revelation of the sons of God (Romans 8:19), as it was subjected to futility for the sake of one day being freed from this subjection when it experiences the freedom of the glory of the children of

God (Romans 8:20-21). Paul goes on to liken creation's pain to that of childbirth, noting that believers groan in a similar manner (Romans 8:22-23). Gaventa has pointed out that believers are included in—not distinct from—“all creation” which is groaning (Gaventa, 2007, pp. 55-56). Paul thus encourages persecuted believers with the reality that all creation is in some way going through the same kind of suffering. All creation in some sense recognizes that something is wrong with the world—and that the revelation of the children of God is the answer. The Holy Spirit is also in solidarity with persecuted Christians as he himself groans over the suffering with groanings too deep for words (Romans 8:26). God the Father and God the Son have shown their love for the people of God through the Cross, and so “If God is for us who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31; see also 32, 35). Suffering is not abnormal; instead, believers have solidarity with nature and creation itself.

Paul commends the Philippians for how they have expressed solidarity with him while he is in prison. Paul notes the fact that, since they had fellowship with him by supporting him financially (Philippians 4:14-18), they are “partakers with me of grace both in my imprisonment and in the defense of the gospel” (1:7). By their monetary gift reaching him in prison, it is as if they are in some sense there, suffering in prison with him. Such multifaceted solidarity has clear implications for believers today.

Turning to solidarity between believer and Christ, we might expect Paul to say something to the effect of, “know that when you are persecuted, Christ is with you. He was persecuted before you and knows what you are going through.” This framework is taught elsewhere in Scripture (for instance, in Hebrews 2:17-18), and certainly Paul wouldn't disagree with it. But strikingly, in Paul's letters the solidarity runs in the opposite direction. It is the believer that joins Christ and enters into solidarity with him through persecution.

Christ has already suffered in history. Paul then enters into union with him in sharing with his sufferings. He writes that he counts all things as loss, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11).

Paul's view that in persecution the believer enters into solidarity with Christ is strikingly seen in Colossians 1:24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” This is a notoriously difficult passage. Surely Paul is not stating that the atoning effect of Christ's sufferings are somehow lacking. Instead, a popular interpretation in scholarship has been to see this passage within the context of Jewish Apocalypticism. Apocalypticism was the idea that the present age was so marred by sin that it could not simply be fixed but needed to be replaced completely by the age to come, with the advent of the Messiah. Before the new age arrived, it was thought that the people of God would experience oppression, referred to as the “Messianic Woes,” or “Messianic Tribulation.” (For an important introduction to the concept and its importance in 1 Peter, see Dubis, 2002; for the Messianic Woes in Paul see Allison, 1985; for the woes in 2 Corinthians, see Barrett, 1973; in Colossians, Bauckham, 1974; in Revelation, Hamilton, 2013). A certain amount of suffering would thus need to be fulfilled (see Revelation 6:9-11) before the new age could be ushered in. In Colossians 1:24, then, Christ-sufferings (Messianic Tribulation) has already begun with Christ, and Paul enters into fellowship with it as he himself suffers. To his imprisonment Paul applies the theological reinterpretation that it is his entrance into the Messianic sufferings that

characterize the present age before Christ. His sufferings, then, are similar to those of Christ before him and those of other believers after him.

Solidarity between the believer and Christ is also seen in 2 Corinthians 1:5: “as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” That the suffering discussed in 2 Corinthians includes persecution is clear from 4:8-9, 6:5, 8, 7:5, 11:23-24, 32. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul adds that part of God’s purpose in suffering is to enable believers to have solidarity with each other. Paul notes that God comforts him and Timothy “so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (1:4). Part of what qualifies Paul for his counseling ministry is the fact that he has experienced persecution—and thus can have solidarity with other believers who are likely to experience persecution as well. Paul experiences suffering so that he can comfort the Corinthians in their suffering (1:6). When the Corinthians share in suffering, then they can share in the Father’s comfort as well (1:7). As Paul enters into solidarity with Christ through suffering, he is enabled to provide solidarity with other believers who are likely to suffer as well.

Elsewhere Paul notes to believers that to receive the gospel even amidst affliction is to imitate the Lord, Paul, and other churches (1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:14). He also draws a connection between the religious leadership that killed Jesus, killed the Old Testament prophets, and in his own day and age persecutes the Church and even “all men” (1 Thessalonians 2:15; the teaching that to be a prophet is to be persecuted is common and appears for example in Matthew 5:12, 23:29–31, 35, 37; Luke 11:47–51; 13:34; Acts 7:52; Romans 11:3; James 5:10). Morris helpfully points out, “This does not mean a conscious patterning of themselves on those churches, but rather that they had endured suffering in the same way” (Morris, 2009).

The previous section noted the centrality of the Church’s mission to pray against persecution. In this section, understanding the theology of solidarity in persecution aids us in fulfilling Hebrews’ command to pray specifically in such a way that we “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (13:30, for pastoral reflections on similar themes, see Fernando, 2008).

Interpreting General Suffering as Persecution

Thus far this study has examined persecution as synonymous with *religious* persecution. This section will argue that certain passages recast non-religious persecution as religious persecution. Acts reports that while in Philippi Paul casts a spirit out of a slave girl (Acts 16:18). This exorcism excites a response from the girl’s owners, who drag Paul and Silas to the local magistrates to beat them and put them in prison (Acts 16:20-24). This persecution, however, is not a religious one. The locals are under the impression that Paul and Silas are Jews (a partial but incomplete truth), and their main concern is financial, as they made money from the actions the girl did while spirit-possessed (Acts 16:19). Thus, while the persecution gets in the way of Paul and Silas’s evangelistic ministry, the persecution is driven by economic concerns—not by specifically religious opposition. However, Acts casts this persecution as parallel to the religious persecution elsewhere in the book. The very next story occurs in Thessalonica where Paul, Silas, and Jason are similarly persecuted, this time for religious reasons as Jewish locals seek to attack them (Acts 17:5). The stories of Philippi and Thessalonica are similar, and Luke composed the accounts in such a way that his readers would connect them. In both stories the persecutors take and drag (though different Greek words for dragging are used) the persecuted to authorities with the intent of beating them. Even in Thessalonica, the Jews who have religious reasons to persecute try to convince local authorities to

join the persecution for non-religious reasons—namely the claim that Paul and Silas are a *political* threat (17:6-7).

The connection between this non-religious persecution recorded in Acts 16 and religious persecution is even clearer in Paul's own recounting of these events. Paul writes Philippians from prison and notes that his imprisonment is "for Christ" (1:13), apparently meaning that preaching the gospel is what got him into prison. He then draws a parallel between his current imprisonment and the persecution he experienced when first in Philippi. Paul describes the Philippians' current struggle as "the same conflict that you saw I had [i.e. in Acts 16) and now hear that I still have" (1:30). In writing to the Thessalonians about when he first met them, he similarly parallels the trip to Philippi in Acts 16 and the trip to Thessalonica in Acts 17: "though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict" (1 Thessalonians 2:2). Thus in both Philippians and Thessalonians, the non-religious persecution experienced at Philippi in Acts 16 is reinterpreted as religious persecution.

In addition, the fact that Paul notes in Philippians that it has *become* known to the imperial guard that his imprisonment is "for Christ" (Philippians 1:13) implies that this interpretation was not self-evident before. (For a defense of this reading of the syntax, Hellerman writes that what has become evident is that "his imprisonment has to do with his Christian faith and missionary activities" (2015, p. 44). There could have been another reason Paul was in prison, but the spiritual (i.e., the real) meaning of his imprisonment was that he was in prison for Christ. Paul suffers "not as a political or civic wrongdoer," but for Christ (Martin, 1987).

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes to a community that he has neither founded nor visited (Colossians 2:1; Pao, 2012, p. 123). In Colossians 1:24 (discussed above), Paul claims that his entrance into the apocalyptic Messianic sufferings occurs *for the sake of* the Colossians, and *for the sake of* Christ's body (Pao, 2012, p. 135). It might seem strange to consider that the Colossians would be benefited by the actions of those unbelievers persecuting Paul. Nevertheless, through Paul's spiritual interpretation of his circumstances, any suffering Paul experiences for Gentiles generally, or for Christ's body, is a benefit to those he has not met at Colossae. Certainly, those imprisoning Paul have no intention of doing so for the benefit of the Church of Christ. But Paul reinterprets his circumstances in light of divine intention and spiritual result.

Ephesians 3 makes a similar statement to the one just discussed in Colossians. (The two letters share drastic similarities broadly). It is possible that in Ephesians also Paul writes to those he has not met. He refers to the fact that he has "heard" of the Ephesians' love (1:15), and they have "heard" of his ministry (3:2; for these and other elements, see Thielman, 2010, p. 15). Again, Paul makes the striking statement that his suffering somehow helps the Gentiles. Thielman writes that Paul's suffering is for people he has never met personally because it is "suffering for the whole body of Christ, which is the church, and...participation in the suffering of Christ himself." (Thielman, 2010, p. 222).

Why would Paul reinterpret non-religious persecution as religious persecution? Perhaps he realized his struggle was not with flesh and blood, and that therefore spiritual forces could influence humans to persecute Paul for any number of reasons. Thus, while the human agent might attack Paul for a non-religious reason, the ultimate force could still be attacking Paul because of his Christian faith and ministry.

This type of religious interpretation seems to give some license to Christians today to reinterpret their suffering in a similar manner. Certainly those of us in contexts of religious freedom should not claim that we are undergoing literal persecution, otherwise this might give credence to the secular claim of Christians having a persecution complex. Nevertheless, it is not altogether wrong to acknowledge that if we are Christians this world is against us, even if it attacks us for seemingly non-religious reasons. Gaffin points out that in Romans 8 Paul asserts that “all creation” experiences suffering. Thus, Christian suffering is not just martyrdom but also involves the mundane, unspectacular, and when things in general simply do not work. Paul wants believers to understand that all believers experience suffering and that their suffering is best labeled missiological (Gaffin, 2022, p. 411). Referring to non-persecution suffering in his comments on Philippians 3, Silva notes, “For the person whose life is committed in its totality to the service of Christ, every affliction and every frustration becomes an obstacle to fulfilling the goal of serving Christ” (Silva, 2005, p. 84). These observations go a long way in helping those of us in contexts that are religiously and politically free find relevance in Paul’s persecution texts.

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