

Part H. Persevering

# The **Bible** Unpacked

## **Intermediate Study Series**

The Bible's teaching summarized  
for growing believers

Paul Mallison



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The Bible's teaching summarized  
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### **Part H. Persevering**

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## A Quick Word

This series of studies aims to present a compilation of the Bible's teachings in a clear and readable order. There are eight booklets in the series, based on the eight parts of the book *The Bible Unpacked - Intermediate Edition*. Each booklet has five chapters, with two sections each. These ten sections can be used for ten or more studies.

The material contains Bible verses. Before the verses are headings, which reflect what the verses say – in particular the parts of the verses in *italics*. The verses are sometimes followed by a comment.

The verses often have a brief introduction. Usually these state who is speaking and often who they are speaking to. Apart from God and Jesus Christ, the main speakers are:

- Moses – who lead the Israelites and taught them God's laws;
- David – Israel's greatest king who wrote many of the psalms, most of which are essentially prayers;
- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and other prophets – who spoke to the people of Israel on God's behalf; and
- Paul, Peter, John and other leaders of the early church – who spoke to various groups and wrote letters to believers.

Much care has been taken in order to correctly interpret the verses. Nevertheless, if you encounter a verse that is used to teach something that is contrary to or goes beyond your understanding, assess its use by doing such things as: reading the passage it is from; and considering how its teaching fits in with Scripture as a whole (e.g. interpret OT teaching in the light of NT teaching).

For more information on *The Bible Unpacked* and free downloads, go to the website: [www.thebibleunpacked.net](http://www.thebibleunpacked.net).

**Users are asked to pray regularly for persecuted Christians** and, if possible, support them financially. These things can be done through organizations that provide aid to them and/or prayer notices, such as those listed under [Persecuted Christians](#).

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## Suggestions for Study Groups

### Preliminary matters:

- Beforehand the leader should: check the context of any verses they are not familiar with; and review the questions. If need be, they should compose questions more applicable to the group.
- Each person should have a Bible, for things such as checking a verse's context. It would also be helpful to have Bible commentaries on hand.
- Pray before beginning the study. Ask God for help in understanding the meaning of the verses and to affect your lives through them. Also pray together at the end.

### Doing the study:

- Ideally, read the material and answer the questions prior to the meeting. Then share answers and discuss any issues arising from the material in the meeting.
- Alternatively, read the material and answer the questions in the meeting – reading either aloud as a group or individually (prior to sharing answers). If reading as a group, **try having one person read the headings, another read the verses and another read the comments.** Additionally, a fourth person could read the Bible references.

### General or concluding questions:

If time permits, conclude with one or more of the following questions:

- What is something that you either: **did not know** before; gained **greater insight** into; or **needed reminding** of?
- What verse would be helpful to memorize and bear in mind during the next week?
- In taking the verses seriously, is there anything you should change in:
  - (a) how you relate to God and/or to other people; or
  - (b) any other area of your life (e.g. attitudes, values or behavior)?

If so, are there any specific steps you could take to do this?





# 36. Standing Firm

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## I. General

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## I. General

The New Testament contains numerous warnings and exhortations to be faithful to God and to hold to the Christian faith. It is every Christian's constant challenge to do so. We need to stand firm, until the end – while ever watching for Jesus Christ's return and the fulfillment of our hope.

### Be Faithful to God

#### Be faithful to God and Jesus Christ

[SOLOMON, TO THE PEOPLE:] *May you, his people, always be faithful to the LORD our God, obeying all his laws and commands, as you do today.* 1 KINGS 8:61 GNT

When he arrived and saw how God had blessed the people, he was glad and *urged them all to be faithful and true to the Lord with all their hearts.* ACTS 11:23 GNT

#### Serve God faithfully

Obey the LORD and *serve him faithfully with all your heart.* Remember the great things he has done for you. 1 SAMUEL 12:24 GNT

#### Do not be unfaithful to God by not obeying him

So Saul died because *he was unfaithful to the LORD and did not obey the LORD's instructions ...* 1 CHRONICLES 10:13A NET

### Remember God and His Word

#### Ensure you remember God

[MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] *Be sure you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments, ordinances, and statutes that I am giving you today. ...* <sup>18</sup>*You must remember the LORD your God, for he is the one who gives ability to get wealth; if you do this he will confirm his covenant that he made by oath to your ancestors, even as he has to this day.* DEUTERONOMY 8:11, 18 NET

## Remember what God has done

*Recall the miraculous deeds he performed, his mighty acts and the judgments he decreed, ...* 1 CHRONICLES 16:12 NET

## Remember God's word and commands

[A PSALMIST, TO GOD:] *I will take pleasure in your laws and remember your words. ...* <sup>93</sup>*I won't ever forget your teachings, because you give me new life by following them.* PSALMS 119:16, 93 CEV

## Persistently meditate on God's word and commands

[A PSALMIST, TO GOD:] *O how I love your law! All day long I meditate on it. ...* <sup>148</sup>*My eyes anticipate the nighttime hours, so that I can meditate on your word.* PSALMS 119:97, 148 NET

## Hold to the Faith

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### Continue to live by Christian teaching

[JOHN, TO HIS FRIEND GAIUS:] *I was so happy when some fellow-Christians arrived and told me how faithful you are to the truth—just as you always live in the truth.* 3 JOHN 1:3 GNT

### Grow in your knowledge of God

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *You will produce fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God.* COLOSSIANS 1:10 NCV™

### Stand firm until the end . . .

[JESUS, TO HIS DISCIPLES:] *And you will be hated by everyone because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.* MATTHEW 10:22 NET

### . . . Persist so that you will receive the reward

*So do not throw away your confidence, because it has great reward.* <sup>36</sup>*For you need endurance in order to do God's will and so receive what is promised.* HEBREWS 10:35–36 NET

## Be Ready for Jesus Christ's Return

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See also: *The Timing of Jesus Christ's Return*, Ch. 15

### **As you do not know when Jesus Christ will come, keep watch and be ready**

*“So keep on watching, because you don’t know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup>But be sure of this: if the owner of the house had known when during the night the thief would be coming, he would have stayed awake and not allowed his house to be broken into. <sup>44</sup>So you, too, must be ready, because at an hour you are not expecting him the Son of Man will come.”* MATTHEW 24:42–44 ISV

### **Do not be deceived by false claims, for Christ's return will be only after certain events – and obvious to all**

*Jesus answered them [his disciples], “Watch out that no one misleads you. <sup>5</sup>For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will mislead many. <sup>6</sup>You will hear of wars and rumors of wars. Make sure that you are not alarmed, for this must happen, but the end is still to come. <sup>7</sup>For nation will rise up in arms against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. <sup>8</sup>All these things are the beginning of birth pains. <sup>9</sup>“Then they will hand you over to be persecuted and will kill you. You will be hated by all the nations because of my name. <sup>10</sup>Then many will be led into sin, and they will betray one another and hate one another. <sup>11</sup>And many false prophets will appear and deceive many, <sup>12</sup>and because lawlessness will increase so much, the love of many will grow cold. <sup>13</sup>But the person who endures to the end will be saved. <sup>14</sup>And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole inhabited earth as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come. ... <sup>26</sup>So then, if someone says to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out, or ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe him. <sup>27</sup>For just like the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so the coming of the Son of Man will be.*

MATTHEW 24:4–14, 26–27 NET

In v. 8 “birth pains” denotes the time of distress which leads into – or “gives birth” to – the reign of the Messiah, following his return.

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What challenges do you face in remaining faithful to God? What advice could you give to someone facing similar challenges?

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What could you do in order to more persistently meditate/focus on God's word? Are there any themes in God's word that you especially need to focus on at this time?

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What motivates you to persist in the faith?

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Are any of the signs of the end approaching (cf. Matt 24:4–14, 26–27) more prevalent now than ever before?

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Are you ready for Jesus Christ's return? If you knew he was returning in the next twelve months, what would you do differently?

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## II. Spiritual Warfare

Living as God wants means involvement in spiritual warfare. Believers are faced with challenges from spiritual adversaries and also from within themselves. Although the forces that oppose believers are formidable, the Bible gives clear instructions on how to counter any threat – through the supreme power of God.

### The Existence of Spiritual Warfare

#### Believers have spiritual enemies, notably Satan

*For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens.* [EPHESIANS 6:12 NET](#)

Be sober and alert. *Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, is on the prowl looking for someone to devour.* [1 PETER 5:8 NET](#)

The believer's struggle is primarily and ultimately against spiritual powers.

#### Believers have human enemies

*Be brave when you face your enemies.* Your courage will show them that they are going to be destroyed, and it will show you that you will be saved. [PHILIPPIANS 1:28A CEV](#)

Believers have human enemies who are opposed to them in regard to spiritual matters – notably in seeking to prevent the spread of the gospel and/or in seeking to impose their own opposing beliefs.

#### Believers face internal spiritual conflict

[PETER:] Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and exiles to keep on abstaining from *the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.* [1 PETER 2:11 ISV](#)

#### But God and Jesus enable Christians to overcome

[PAUL:] What then shall we say about these things? *If God is for us, who can be against us? ...* <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we have complete victory through him [Christ] who loved us! [ROMANS 8:31, 37 NET](#)

## Engaging in Spiritual Warfare

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Believers are to engage in spiritual warfare both in standing firm in their faith and in advancing the cause of God's kingdom. Generally speaking, the former has a defensive sense and the latter an offensive sense.

### Resist Satan

But *resist the devil and he will flee from you.* JAMES 4:7B NET

### Use spiritual weapons and armor

For this reason, *take up the full armor of God so that you may be able to stand your ground on the evil day, and having done everything, to stand.* <sup>14</sup>Stand firm therefore, by fastening the belt of truth around your waist, by putting on the breastplate of righteousness, <sup>15</sup>by fitting your feet with the preparation that comes from the good news of peace, ... EPHESIANS 6:13–15 NET

Verse 15 is most likely speaking of believers having a strong grasp of the truths of the gospel so as to be ready for action (cf. NASB, NCV, NKJV). Possibly a readiness to proclaim this gospel is in view.

### Spiritual weapons and armor include: faith; . . .

*At all times carry faith as a shield; for with it you will be able to put out all the burning arrows shot by the Evil One.* EPHESIANS 6:16 GNT

### . . . God's word; . . .

And take the helmet of salvation and *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* EPHESIANS 6:17 NET

The description of God's word as "the sword of the Spirit" reflects its: power; offensive and defensive roles; spiritual nature; and importance to the work of the Holy Spirit. Note that the "helmet of salvation" may well have in view the hope of salvation (cf. 1 Thes 5:8).

### . . . and prayer

*Never stop praying, especially for others. Always pray by the power of the Spirit. Stay alert and keep praying for God's people.* EPHESIANS 6:18 CEV

## Counteraction of Demons

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### Distinguishing between the Holy Spirit and demons

[JOHN:] Dear friends, stop believing every spirit. Instead, *test the spirits to see whether they are from God*, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup>*This is how you can recognize God's Spirit: Every spirit who acknowledges that Jesus the Messiah has come in the flesh is from God.* <sup>3</sup>*But every spirit who does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist. ...* <sup>6</sup>*We belong to God. The person who knows God listens to us. Whoever does not belong to God does not listen to us. This is how we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit.* 1 JOHN 4:1–3A, 6 ISV

John says that his readers could tell if the spirit influencing a prophet is the Holy Spirit or an evil one by whether or not the prophet acknowledged Jesus, in particular whether they acknowledged that he had come in the flesh. To do so would be indicative of the Holy Spirit's conviction. Presumably this test for recognizing the Holy Spirit can be applied to other truths about Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3). Additionally, one can infer from v. 6 that prophets or teachers who do not listen to the teachings of the apostles are not from God and are under the influence of evil spirits.

### Demons are driven out of people in Jesus Christ's "name"

She [a girl with an evil spirit] continued to do this for many days. But Paul became greatly annoyed, and turned and *said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!"* And it came out of her at once. ACTS 16:18 NET

To do things in Jesus Christ's "name" involves acting: as his representative; by his authority; and in accordance with his will. It involves acting in reliance on his power, by faith in him.

### The Holy Spirit and prayer also figure in driving out demons

[JESUS:] But if *I cast out demons by the Spirit of God*, then the kingdom of God has already overtaken you. MATTHEW 12:28 NET

Then, after he [Jesus] went into the house, his disciples asked him privately, *"Why couldn't we cast it out?"* <sup>29</sup>*He told them, "This kind can come out only by prayer."* MARK 9:28–29 NET



## Ungodly Spiritualistic Practices

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In conjunction with engaging in spiritual warfare, we are not to engage in any ungodly spiritualistic practices, which ultimately involve cooperative interaction with demons and even Satan.

### **Avoid witchcraft and other occult practices**

[MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] *You must never sacrifice your sons or daughters by burning them alive, practice black magic, be a fortuneteller, witch, or sorcerer, <sup>1</sup>cast spells, ask ghosts or spirits for help, or consult the dead.* DEUTERONOMY 18:10–11 GW

### **Do not consult anyone who performs occult practices**

*Do not go for advice to people who consult the spirits of the dead.* LEVITICUS 19:31A GNT

### **Do not have other “gods” or idols**

[GOD, TO THE ISRAELITES:] “I, the LORD, am your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. <sup>3</sup>*You shall have no other gods before me.* <sup>4</sup>*You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water below.* <sup>5</sup>*You shall not bow down to them or serve them,* for I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, responding to the transgression of fathers by dealing with children to the third and fourth generations of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup>*and showing covenant faithfulness to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.* EXODUS 20:2–6 NET

Pray for the persecuted

In what ways are you aware of spiritual warfare?

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Some people worry a lot about Satan and demons, while others are not concerned at all. How should we view them?

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What is one spiritual weapon you could make better use of? How could you?

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Explain Paul's claim that believers have "complete victory" through Christ against adversaries and hardship (Rom 8:37; cf. vv. 31–39).

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Do you have any "gods", things that you give a higher priority to than you do to God? If so, what can you do about them?

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# 37. Rejecting Sin

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## I. Encountering Sin

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## II. Avoiding Sin and Being Holy

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## I. Encountering Sin

Inevitably on occasions sin “leaks” into our lives, with its ill effects on ourselves and on our relationship with God. But if we address it as the Bible says to, God promises to forgive our sins and take in hand its effects.

Note that the teaching in this section is applicable to both new believers ridding themselves of their old ways and to believers returning to God after having lapsed into sin. However, the focus is more on the latter.

### Consequences of Sin for God’s People

#### Sin deprives God’s people of his blessings

[GOD, TO UNFAITHFUL ISRAEL:] *Your misdeeds have stopped these things from coming. Your sins have deprived you of my bounty.* JEREMIAH 5:25 NET

#### God may punish sin, which can mean physical suffering and emotional anguish

[DAVID, TO GOD:] *My whole body is sick because of your judgment; I am deprived of health because of my sin. <sup>4</sup>For my sins overwhelm me; like a heavy load, they are too much for me to bear. ... <sup>8</sup>I am numb with pain and severely battered; I groan loudly because of the anxiety I feel.* PSALMS 38:3–4, 8 NET

#### Sin defiles God’s people – making them spiritually unclean

*They [the sinful Israelites] were defiled by their deeds, and unfaithful in their actions.* PSALMS 106:39 NET

*Jerusalem has sinned greatly, therefore she has become unclean.* LAMENTATIONS 1:8A ISV

#### God turns away from those who persist in sin

*Someday these sinners will cry to the LORD for help, but he will not answer them. He will hide his face from them at that time, because they have done such wicked deeds.* MICAH 3:4 NET

## Addressing Sin (I): Return from Sin to God

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Even if sin has not led to a believer completely falling away from God, all sin hinders one from being fully devoted to God to some extent. Thus one needs to turn away from any sin and return to being completely devoted to God.

### Stop sinning

Sober up as you should, and *stop sinning!* 1 CORINTHIANS 15:34A NET

### Return to God with all your heart

“Yet even now,” the LORD says, “*return to me with all your heart – with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Tear your hearts, not just your garments!*” <sup>13</sup>*Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love – often relenting from calamitous punishment.* JOEL 2:12–13 NET

### In returning from sin to God, do what God wants

[EZRA THE PRIEST, TO THE UNFAITHFUL PEOPLE:] Now then, confess your sins to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and *do what pleases him.* EZRA 10:11 GNT

[HOSEA, TO ISRAEL:] But you must return to your God, by maintaining love and justice, and by waiting for your God to return to you. HOSEA 12:6 NET

## Addressing Sin (II): Deal with Sin before God

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### Confess your sin to God

As soon as you discover that you have committed any of these sins, you must confess what you have done. LEVITICUS 5:5 CEV

### Be sorrowful over your sin

*The sacrifice God wants is a broken spirit. God, you will not reject a heart that is broken and sorry for sin.* PSALMS 51:17 NCV™

A “broken” spirit or heart is one that is deeply remorseful.

## Humble yourself before God over your sin

*The tax collector, however, stood far off and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!’* LUKE 18:13 NET

## Ask God for forgiveness and restoration

[DAVID, TO GOD AFTER COMMITTING TERRIBLE SIN:] *God, be merciful to me because you are loving. Because you are always ready to be merciful, wipe out all my wrongs. <sup>2</sup>Wash away all my guilt and make me clean again. ... <sup>7</sup>Take away my sin, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. <sup>8</sup>Make me hear sounds of joy and gladness; let the bones you crushed be happy again. <sup>9</sup>Turn your face from my sins and wipe out all my guilt. <sup>10</sup>Create in me a pure heart, God, and make my spirit right again. <sup>11</sup>Do not send me away from you or take your Holy Spirit away from me. <sup>12</sup>Give me back the joy of your salvation. Keep me strong by giving me a willing spirit.* PSALMS 51:1–2, 7–12 NCV™

## God’s Response to Repentance

### God forgives our sins

[JOHN, TO BELIEVERS:] *But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness.* 1 JOHN 1:9 NET

### God restores our relationship with him

So tell the people [of Judah]: This is what the LORD All-Powerful says: *‘Return to me, and I will return to you,’ says the LORD All-Powerful.* ZECHARIAH 1:3 NCV™

[GOD:] *I will be their God and they will be my people. For they will wholeheartedly return to me.* JEREMIAH 24:7B NET

Here God in effect promises his unfaithful people that if they returned to him wholeheartedly, he would restore his relationship with them to what it should be. As such, they would again be his people and he would be their God.

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What effects of sin have you been aware of in your own life, or in the lives of people you know?

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What should we do about sin that we have committed?

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What is involved in turning back to God with all our heart (cf. Joel 2:12)?

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Why is it important to be sorry for sin? To what extent should we be sorrowful?

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Is there any response to our own sin that is mentioned here, that you have not previously considered or often overlook? If so, how do you think this response might be helpful?

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## II. Avoiding Sin and Being Holy

The Bible does not merely tell us not to sin. It also helps us not to do so by giving sound instructions and alternatives to sin. In conjunction with this, the Bible calls us to be holy – i.e. to live pure lives, set apart from all that is ungodly.

### Avoiding Sin

#### Take care in avoiding sin

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *Even if you think you can stand up to temptation, be careful not to fall.* 1 CORINTHIANS 10:12 CEV

#### Ask God for help to avoid sin

[DAVID, TO GOD:] *Moreover, keep me from committing flagrant sins; do not allow such sins to control me.* Then I will be blameless, and innocent of blatant rebellion. PSALMS 19:13 NET

#### For God and Jesus Christ are willing and able to help us withstand temptation

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *No temptation has overtaken you that is unusual for human beings. But God is faithful, and he will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength. Instead, along with the temptation he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to endure it.* 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13 ISV

*For we do not have a high priest incapable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, but one [Christ] who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin.* <sup>16</sup>*Therefore let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace whenever we need help.* HEBREWS 4:15–16 NET

#### Use God's word to avoid sin

[A PSALMIST, TO GOD:] *How can a young person maintain a pure life? By guarding it according to your instructions! ...* <sup>11</sup>*In my heart I store up your words, so I might not sin against you.* PSALMS 119:9, 11 NET



## Avoid sinful desires

[PETER, TO BELIEVERS:] Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and exiles to *keep on abstaining from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.* 1 PETER 2:11 ISV

## Get rid of sinful influences

[JESUS, SPEAKING FIGURATIVELY:] *If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.* It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. *And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.* It is better for you to enter into life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into fiery hell. MATTHEW 18:8–9 NET

These instructions are not meant to be taken literally. They are hyperbole, emphasizing that one should do whatever is needed to get rid of sinful influences and avoid sin.

## Hate evil and sin

[WISDOM PERSONIFIED:] To fear the LORD is to *hate evil. I hate pride, arrogance, evil behavior, and twisted speech.* PROVERBS 8:13 GW

## Alternatives to Sin

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### Instead of living by the sinful nature, live by the Holy Spirit

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] He [God] condemned sin in the flesh <sup>4</sup>so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who *do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* <sup>5</sup>*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.* ROMANS 8:3B–5 ISV

Our human nature (“the flesh”) is essentially sinful. But God has given his Holy Spirit to believers. As such, we are to live by God’s Holy Spirit. This involves: being both alert to and responsive to the Spirit’s promptings; and being reliant on his power, to enable and transform us. In conjunction with this, our minds should be focused on “things of the Spirit” (v. 5).

## Instead of living as a slave to sin, live as a slave to righteousness and God

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *Just as you once offered the parts of your body as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater disobedience, so now, in the same way, you must offer the parts of your body as slaves to righteousness that leads to sanctification. ...*<sup>22</sup>But now that you have been freed from sin and have become God's slaves, the benefit you reap is sanctification, and the result is eternal life. [ROMANS 6:19B, 22 ISV](#)

One of the most effective preventative measures against sinning is to be preoccupied with doing good – as is the case when one lives as a slave to righteousness and God.

## Be Holy

To be holy involves being separated from corruptive influences and totally dedicated to God. As such it includes moral purity and obedience to God. The ongoing process of becoming increasingly holy is largely facilitated by God, but in accordance believers are called upon to be holy. (See also the introductory comment on *God Makes His People Holy*, Ch. 18)

### Be holy as God is holy

[PETER, TO BELIEVERS:] As obedient children, do not be shaped by the desires that you once had in your ignorance. <sup>15</sup>Instead, *just as the one who called you is holy, be holy in every aspect of your life.* <sup>16</sup>For it is written, “*You must be holy, because I am holy.*” [1 PETER 1:14–16 ISV](#)

If we are to be God's people, acceptable to him, we need to be holy because: God is holy and so does not accept anything that is not holy. Therefore we should aspire to be holy, like God.

### Be set apart for God

[GOD, TO THE ISRAELITES:] Therefore *separate yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God.* [LEVITICUS 20:7 ISV](#)

The lambs were eaten by the Israelites who had returned from exile and by *all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of the non-Jews in the land to worship the LORD God of Israel.* [EZRA 6:21 GW](#)

**Do not conform to this world**

*Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God – what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.*

ROMANS 12:2 NET

In the NT the “world” often refers to the system of values, attitudes and behavior commonplace in society – along with the people and social structures that conform to this system. This system is largely antagonistic towards or dismissive of God. As such, the “world” is essentially evil, and so it is imperative that believers do not conform to it.

**Do not live as other people do**

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] So I tell you and encourage you in the Lord’s name *not to live any longer like other people in the world. Their minds are set on worthless things.* EPHESIANS 4:17 GW

**Avoid bad company**

[DAVID:] *I do not keep company with worthless people; I have nothing to do with hypocrites. <sup>5</sup>I hate the company of the evil and avoid the wicked.* PSALMS 26:4–5 GNT

Pray for the persecuted

Explain in your own words what it means to “live according to the Spirit” (cf. Romans 8:3b-5)?

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How does being preoccupied with doing what is right – including doing good deeds – help us to avoid sin? What right or good things could you be more focused on doing?

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What suggestions would you give to someone who is struggling to avoid sin?

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What is involved in being holy?

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Is there anything of this world – even something that is not necessarily sinful in itself – which you need to separate yourself from?

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# 38. Major Pitfalls

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## I. Pride

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## I. Pride

Pride is one of the greatest dangers to one's life as a believer, yet it is also one of the most subtle. Pride has an adverse effect on both our relationship with God and our relationships with others. The opposite to pride is humility, which correspondingly is very much a key factor in living an ongoing and effective Christian life.

### Pride in Thought

#### Do not be proud

Hear and give ear; *be not proud*, for the LORD has spoken.

JEREMIAH 13:15 ESV

#### Do not think you are better than others

*He [the king] should not think he is better than his fellow Israelites, and he must not stop obeying the law in any way ...*

DEUTERONOMY 17:20A NCV™

#### Do not be wise in your own eyes

*How horrible it will be for those who think they are wise and consider themselves to be clever.*

ISAIAH 5:21 GW

#### Do not be self-righteous

*Jesus also told this parable to some who were confident that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else.* <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>*The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: extortionists, unrighteous people, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.’* <sup>13</sup>The tax collector, however, stood far off and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!’ <sup>14</sup>*I tell you that this man went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.*”

LUKE 18:9–14 NET

## Pride in Action

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### Do not exalt yourself . . .

*Do not exalt yourself in the presence of the king, And do not stand in the place of the great; ...* PROVERBS 25:6 NKJV

The second part seems to speak of claiming a place among the great.

### . . . Honor others, rather than yourself

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] Love each other as brothers and sisters and honor others more than you do yourself. ROMANS 12:10 CEV

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to *treat one another as more important than yourself.* PHILIPPIANS 2:3 NET

### Do not boast about yourself

*Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips.* PROVERBS 27:2 NET

## Outcomes of Pride

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### Pride is very detrimental to a relationship with God

[MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] ... *make sure that you do not become proud and forget the LORD your God who rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves.* DEUTERONOMY 8:14 GNT

[A PSALMIST, TO GOD:] *The wicked are too proud to turn to you or even think about you.* PSALMS 10:4 CEV

In their pride, the wicked have no desire and see no need to seek God, often due to a perceived self-sufficiency. Being “full of themselves” they have no room for God in their lives.

### Pride is associated with self-deception and flawed understanding

[GOD, TO THE NATION OF EDMON:] *Your pride has deceived you. Your capital is a fortress of solid rock; your home is high in the mountains, and so you say to yourself, ‘Who can ever pull me down?’*  
<sup>4</sup>*Even though you make your home as high as an eagle’s nest, so that*

*it seems to be among the stars, yet I will pull you down.* OBADIAH 1:3–4 GNT

[PAUL, SPEAKING OF A TYPICAL FALSE TEACHER:] *This person is full of pride and understands nothing, but is sick with a love for arguing and fighting about words.* 1 TIMOTHY 6:4A NCV™

### **Pride leads to one’s downfall**

*Before destruction the heart of a person is proud, but humility comes before honor.* PROVERBS 18:12 NET

## **Antithesis of Pride: Humility**

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Humility is the opposite of pride. It is a most critical attitude for maintaining one’s guard against things that can cause one to fall – spiritually and otherwise. This is in contrast to pride which opens oneself up to many kinds of destructive dangers (as reflected in the previous section, *Outcomes of Pride*).

### **Be humble – particularly before God**

This is what the LORD requires from you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to *live humbly with your God.* MICAH 6:8B GW

Then he [an angelic messenger] said to me, “Don’t be afraid, Daniel, for from the very first day you applied your mind to understand and to *humble yourself before your God*, your words were heard. I have come in response to your words.” DANIEL 10:12 NET

### **Be humble towards others**

*Be humble and gentle in every way.* EPHESIANS 4:2A GW

[PETER, TO BELIEVERS:] *And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.* 1 PETER 5:5B NET

Pray for the persecuted



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What are the dangers of thinking that you are wise or clever?

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How can we avoid being self-righteous?

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Why is pride so detrimental to a relationship with God?

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Do you boast about yourself in any subtle (or not so subtle) way?

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How does one "be humble"? What attitudes and actions does it involve?

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## II. Riches and Sex

Riches and sex are both good in themselves; in fact they are blessings from God. However they both are easily and often misused, bringing ill effects for both ourselves and others. Indeed, few things have the capacity of riches or sex for both good and harm. So it should be no surprise that they feature so prominently in the Bible's teaching on our relationships with others and moreover our relationship with God.

### Riches and Godliness

#### Riches are a barrier to a relationship with God

*Do not accumulate for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup>But accumulate for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup>For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ... <sup>24</sup>“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. MATTHEW 6:19–21, 24 NET*

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! MARK 10:23 NET

#### Riches even draw one away from God

*But people who want to get rich keep toppling into temptation and are trapped by many stupid and harmful desires that plunge them into destruction and ruin. <sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, in their eagerness to get rich, have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with much pain. 1 TIMOTHY 6:9–10 ISV*

#### So, do not love money and be content with what you have

*Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for God has said, “I will never leave you or abandon you.” HEBREWS 13:5 ISV*

## Further Warnings about Riches

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### Riches are not secure

[PAUL, INSTRUCTING TIMOTHY WHAT TO TEACH BELIEVERS:] Tell those who have the riches of this world not to be arrogant and *not to place their confidence in anything as uncertain as riches*. Instead, they should place their confidence in God who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. [1 TIMOTHY 6:17](#) GW

### Life does not last and the dead cannot take their riches with them

*Surely one sees that even wise people die; fools and spiritually insensitive people all pass away and leave their wealth to others.*

[PSALMS 49:10](#) NET

*For we did not bring anything into the world, and surely we cannot take anything out of it.* [1 TIMOTHY 6:7](#) ISV

### Hoarding riches will bring ill consequences in the afterlife

[JESUS:] But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your comfort already. <sup>25</sup>“Woe to you who are well satisfied with food now, for you will be hungry.” [LUKE 6:24–25A](#) NET

## Sexual Sin

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### Avoid sexual sin

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] But *among you there must not be either sexual immorality, impurity of any kind, or greed*, as these are not fitting for the saints. [EPHESIANS 5:3](#) NET

The experts in the law and the Pharisees *brought a woman who had been caught committing adultery*. They made her stand in front of them <sup>4</sup>and said to Jesus, “Teacher, *this woman was caught in the very act of adultery*. ... <sup>7</sup>When they persisted in asking him, he stood up straight and replied, “Whoever among you is guiltless may be the first to throw a stone at her.” <sup>8</sup>Then he bent over again and wrote on the ground. <sup>9</sup>Now when they heard this, they began to drift away one at a time, starting with the older ones, until Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. <sup>10</sup>Jesus stood up straight and

said to her, “Woman, where are they? Did no one condemn you?” “She replied, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “I do not condemn you either. *Go, and from now on do not sin any more.*” JOHN 8:3–4, 7–11 NET

### **Sexual sin has ill consequences**

Keep on running away from sexual immorality. *Any other sin that a person commits is outside his body, but the person who sins sexually sins against his own body.* 1 CORINTHIANS 6:18 ISV

In contrast to other sins, sexual sin involves the misuse and mistreatment of one’s own body. Moreover, Paul seems to imply that sexual sin adversely affects the body or one’s being in a deeper way than any other sin (cf. CEV, GNT, NLT).

### **Sexual sin ultimately results in God’s judgment**

Marriage must be honored among all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, for *God will judge sexually immoral people and adulterers.*

HEBREWS 13:4 NET

## **Prohibited Forms of Sex**

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See also: *Do not rape*, Ch. 31; *Do not commit adultery*, Ch. 34

### **Lust**

[JESUS:] You have heard that it was said, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup>*But I say to you, anyone who stares at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* MATTHEW 5:27–28 ISV

Gazing longingly at a woman with sexual desire, is committing adultery in one’s heart and in a spiritual sense.

### **Sex apart from marriage**

[MOSES, SPEAKING OF ANY WOMAN WHO HAD HAD PREMARITAL SEX:] *She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by having sexual relations before she was married.* You must get rid of the evil among you. DEUTERONOMY 22:21B NCV™

## Prostitution

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *Surely you know that your bodies are parts of Christ himself. So I must never take the parts of Christ and join them to a prostitute!* 1 CORINTHIANS 6:15 NCV™

## Homosexual acts

[PAUL, SPEAKING OF UNGODLY PEOPLE:] For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. For *their women exchanged the natural sexual relations for unnatural ones,* <sup>27</sup>*and likewise the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed in their passions for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.*

ROMANS 1:26–27 NET

This teaches that homosexual relations are unnatural. In v. 27, the phrase “received in themselves the due penalty” implies that the committing of such acts carries its own natural consequences.

## Epilogue: Be Wary

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### Be alert and sober

So then we must not sleep as the rest, but must *stay alert and sober.*

1 THESSALONIANS 5:6 NET

### Examine and evaluate yourself

*Let us test and examine our ways,* and return to the LORD!

LAMENTATIONS 3:40 ESV

### Keep a clear conscience

Paul looked straight at the Council and said, “Brothers, *with a clear conscience I have done my duty before God up to this very day.*”

ACTS 23:1 ISV

Pray for the persecuted

How do riches form a barrier to our relationship with God?

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If you are presently contemplating buying new clothes or making renovations to your house, how necessary are these? What steps can we take in order to be content and get by with what we have?

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Do you use/invest your money primarily for your future on earth or your future in the afterlife?

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How is sexual sin detrimental to oneself?

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What should we do in order to “test and examine our ways” (Lam 3:40)?

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# 39. Hard Times

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## I. General

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## I. General

Hard times are experienced by all Christians. This reality is reflected in the Bible, notably in Job and Psalms. But the Bible also shows that there are a number of practical and effective things that we can do when undergoing hard times.

Note that the following chapter looks at experiencing persecution due to one's faith. This chapter deals with undergoing hard times in general – particularly when one is hurting or "down" – irrespective of whether such times are a result of one's faith or not. As such the responses discussed in this chapter, supplement or reinforce the responses to persecution that are given in the following chapter.

### Prologue: God's People Still Have Hard Times

See also: *God Disciplines His People*, Ch. 18; *I. The Persecution of God's People*, Ch. 40

#### Trouble is characteristic of human life

[ELIPHAZ:] *But a person is born for trouble as surely as sparks fly up from a fire.* JOB 5:7 GW

#### Examples of God's people undergoing hard times

*Elijah was afraid, so he got up and fled for his life to Beer Sheba in Judah. He left his servant there, <sup>4</sup>while he went a day's journey into the desert. He went and sat down under a shrub and asked the LORD to take his life: "I've had enough! Now, O LORD, take my life. After all, I'm no better than my ancestors."* 1 KINGS 19:3–4 NET

[JOB:] *I have no ease, I have no quietness; I cannot rest; turmoil has come upon me.* JOB 3:26 NET

#### An example of hard times even being attributed to God

[NAOMI:] *Call me Mara, because God has made my life bitter. <sup>21</sup>I had everything when I left, but the LORD has brought me back with nothing. How can you still call me Naomi, when God has turned against me and made my life so hard?* RUTH 1:20B–21 CEV



## Mourn Loss

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### Mourn and weep over loss – particularly deaths

Now when Mary came to the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, “Lord, if you had been here, *my brother would not have died.*” <sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the people who had come with her weeping, he was intensely moved in spirit and greatly distressed. <sup>34</sup>He asked, “Where have you laid him?” They replied, “Lord, come and see.” <sup>35</sup>Jesus wept. JOHN 11:32–35 NET

*Some devout men buried Stephen, mourning for him with loud cries.*

ACTS 8:2 GNT

### Mourn before God

The men of Ai killed about thirty–six of them [Israelites] and chased them from in front of the city gate all the way to the fissures and defeated them on the steep slope. The people’s courage melted away like water. <sup>6</sup>Joshua tore his clothes; he and the leaders of Israel lay face down on the ground before the ark of the LORD until evening and threw dirt on their heads. JOSHUA 7:5–6 NET

The actions of Joshua and the leaders (v. 6) signified mourning. Particularly as the ark signified God’s presence amongst the Israelites, this is an example of people mourning before God.

## Keep in Mind God and His Word

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### In hard times, remember God

[NEHEMIAH, SPEAKING TO HIS PEOPLE ABOUT ENEMY THREATS:] “*Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the great and awesome Lord, and fight on behalf of your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your families!*” NEHEMIAH 4:14B NET

### Keep meditating on God’s word and obeying it

[A PSALMIST, TO GOD:] Though rulers plot and slander me, *your servant meditates on your statutes.* ... <sup>166</sup>I hope for your deliverance, O LORD, and I obey your commands. PSALMS 119:23, 166 NET

## Take comfort in God's word

[A PSALMIST, TO GOD:] *This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life. ...* <sup>52</sup>*When I think of your rules from of old, I take comfort, O LORD.* PSALMS 119:50, 52 ESV

In v. 50 the psalmist says that his comfort in suffering is God's promise which preserves or "revives" (NET) his life, through the hope that it gives.

## Trust in God

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See also: [In persecution:] *Have Faith in God and Pray*, Ch. 40

### Trust in God

[DAVID, TO GOD:] It is like terror all around me, as they conspire together and plot to take my life. <sup>14</sup>*But I trust in you, O LORD. I say, "You are my God."* <sup>15</sup>*My times are in your hands. Deliver me from the hands of my enemies and from those who pursue me.* PSALMS 31:13B–15 ISV

The statement: "You are my God" (v. 14), implies that the LORD is the one David trusts in as sovereign over his life, the one who held his present and future circumstances in his hands (v. 15a).

### Take refuge in God, for God saves and protects those who do

*The one who lives in the shelter of the Most High and who abides in the shadow of the Almighty* <sup>2</sup>*will say to the LORD, "You are my refuge, my fortress, and my God in whom I trust!"* <sup>3</sup>*He will surely deliver you from the hunter's snare and from the destructive plague.* <sup>4</sup>*With his feathers he will cover you, and under his wings you will find safety. His truth is your shield and armor.* <sup>5</sup>*You need not fear terror that stalks in the night, the arrow that flies in the day;* <sup>6</sup>*plague that strikes in the darkness, or calamity that destroys at noon.* <sup>7</sup>*If a thousand fall at your side or ten thousand at your right hand, it will not overcome you. ...* <sup>9</sup>*"O LORD, you are my refuge!" Because you chose the Most High as your dwelling place,* <sup>10</sup>*no evil will fall upon you, and no affliction will approach your tent,* <sup>11</sup>*for he will command his angels to protect you in all your ways.* <sup>12</sup>*With their hands they will lift you up so you will not trip over a stone.* PSALMS 91:1–7, 9–12 ISV

## Hope in God and Wait for Him

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### Put your hope in God . . .

[A PSALMIST:] *Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation<sup>6</sup> and my God.* PSALMS 42:5–6A ESV

[JEREMIAH:] Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! <sup>20</sup>My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. <sup>21</sup>But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup>they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. LAMENTATIONS 3:19–23 ESV

### . . . Look resolutely and expectantly to God

[DAVID:] *I continually look to the LORD for help, for he will free my feet from the enemy's net.* PSALMS 25:15 NET

[JEHOSHAPHAT, AS JUDAH FACED INVASION:] O our God, will you not execute judgment on them? For we are powerless against this great horde that is coming against us. *We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.* 2 CHRONICLES 20:12 ESV

### Wait for God, with confidence that he will act

[DAVID:] *I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! <sup>14</sup>Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!* PSALMS 27:13–14 ESV

Note that God's action on behalf of his troubled people is not always simply the removal of the cause of their trouble. It may instead involve strengthening his people to cope with the trouble, with inner joy and peace.

### Wait quietly and patiently

*Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!* PSALMS 37:7 ESV

Are there any phrases and depictions of suffering in these verses that you identify with – from past or present experience of intense suffering? If so, which?

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How do you think you would find it helpful to grieve and mourn over loss “before” God?

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Is there a verse/s that you turn to in hard times – or can you think of one/s that would be helpful? If so, share it with the group.

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What is involved in trusting in God during suffering?

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How should we apply OT verses such as Ps 91:9–12 in light of NT verses which speak of faithfulness to Christ bringing suffering, even death?

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## II. Praying in Hard Times

Prayer is probably the most prominent positive response to hard times. The Bible shows us a great deal about praying to God in such times. The psalms in particular contain a number of prayers of people faced with great difficulties and suffering, from which we can learn much.

### Tell God about Your Problems

#### When facing trouble, pray to God

[GOD:] *Pray to me when you are in trouble!* I will deliver you, and you will honor me! [PSALMS 50:15 NET](#)

*Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray.* Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praises. [JAMES 5:13 NET](#)

#### Tell God of your plight and how you feel

[DAVID, TO GOD:] Do not remain far away from me, for *trouble is near and I have no one to help me.* ... <sup>14</sup>*My strength drains away like water; all my bones are dislocated; my heart is like wax; it melts away inside me.* [PSALMS 22:11, 14 NET](#)

[DAVID, TO GOD:] Turn to me and have mercy on me, because *I am lonely and hurting.* <sup>17</sup>*My troubles have grown larger; free me from my problems.* <sup>18</sup>*Look at my suffering and troubles, and take away all my sins.* <sup>19</sup>*Look at how many enemies I have! See how much they hate me!* [PSALMS 25:16–19 NCV™](#)

#### Pour out your heart to God

Trust in him at all times, you people! *Pour out your hearts before him!* God is our shelter! (Selah) [PSALMS 62:8 NET](#)

[HANNAH:] *I have poured out my soul to the LORD.* <sup>16</sup>... *I have spoken from my deep pain and anguish.* [1 SAMUEL 1:15B, 16B NET](#)

To pour out your heart to God involves telling God about all your concerns and feelings. In a sense it is to empty your heart of all its troubles, laying them out before God.

## Ask God for Help

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See also: *Making Requests*, Ch. 24; and *Have Faith in God and Pray*, Ch. 40

### Cry out to God for help

[DAVID:] In my distress I called to the LORD; *I cried out to my God*. From his heavenly temple he heard my voice; *he listened to my cry for help*. PSALMS 18:6 NET

### Ask God for strength

[A PSALMIST, TO GOD:] My soul melts away for sorrow; *strengthen me according to your word!* PSALMS 119:28 ESV

### Ask God to guide you

[DAVID, TO GOD:] May I hear about your loyal love in the morning, for I trust in you. *Show me the way I should go*, because I long for you. PSALMS 143:8 NET

### Ask God for deliverance

[DAVID:] O God, because of your great loyal love, *answer me with your faithful deliverance!* <sup>14</sup>*Rescue me from the mud! Don't let me sink! Deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep water!* PSALMS 69:13B–14 NET

### Persist in prayer to God

LORD, you are the God who saves me. *I cry out to you day and night*. PSALMS 88:1 NCV™

## Praise and Rejoice in God

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### Praise and thank God amidst trouble

He [Jehoshaphat] met with the people and *appointed musicians to play before the LORD and praise his majestic splendor*. As they marched ahead of the warriors they said: *“Give thanks to the LORD, for his loyal love endures.”* <sup>22</sup>*When they began to shout and praise*, the LORD suddenly attacked the Ammonites, Moabites, and men

from Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.

2 CHRONICLES 20:21–22 NET

[JOB, RESPONDING TO HORRIFIC LOSS:] *The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.*” JOB 1:21B ESV

### Rejoice in God amidst trouble

[HABAKKUK:] Even though the fig tree does not blossom, and there are no grapes on the vines; even if the olive harvest fails, and the fields produce nothing edible; even if the flock is snatched from the sheepfold, and there is no herd in the stalls— <sup>18</sup>*as for me, I will rejoice in the LORD. I will find my joy in the God of my deliverance.*

HABAKKUK 3:17–18 ISV

## Epilogue: God Does Respond to Suffering

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### God is near us in hard times

*The LORD is close to the brokenhearted, and he saves those whose spirits have been crushed.* PSALMS 34:18 NCV™

### God comforts his people in hard times

[DAVID, TO GOD:] *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff; they comfort me.* PSALMS 23:4 ESV

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,* <sup>4</sup>*who comforts us in all our troubles* so that we may be able to comfort those experiencing any trouble with *the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.* 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–4 NET

### Testimony to God answering prayers in suffering and trouble

[DAVID:] *I sought the LORD’s help and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. ...* <sup>6</sup>*This oppressed man cried out and the LORD heard; he saved him from all his troubles.* PSALMS 34:4, 6 NET

What is meant by “pour out your heart” to God (cf. Psalms 62:8)? How does doing this help in suffering?

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Apart from God’s response, how does persisting in prayer benefit a suffering person – both during the suffering and afterwards?

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What is one thing mentioned (or perhaps a verse) that you ought to keep in mind when facing hard times? How would it help you?

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With a difficult time in your life in view – past or present – compose a prayer acknowledging your difficulty but also giving praise and thanks to God. Perhaps draw upon phrases from the verses.

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Can you think of a time when God responded to suffering – either in your life or that of someone close to you?

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# 40. Persecution

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## I. The Persecution of God’s People

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## II. What to Do in Persecution

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## I. The Persecution of God’s People

The Bible warns that faithfully following God inevitably results in persecution and difficulties. In fact in a number of countries today severe persecution of Christians is common. Additionally, the Bible speaks of a time just prior to Jesus Christ’s return when persecution will be severe worldwide. But along with such warnings, the Bible gives wonderful and powerful promises of God’s care for his people in the face of persecution.

### The Reality of Persecution

#### Following God and Jesus Christ results in persecution . . .

Now *in fact all who want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* 2 TIMOTHY 3:12 NET

[JESUS, TO HIS DISCIPLES:] *People will put you out of their synagogues. Yes, the time is coming when those who kill you will think they are offering service to God. <sup>3</sup>They will do this because they have not known the Father and they have not known me. <sup>4</sup>I have told you these things now so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you.* JOHN 16:2–4A NCV™

#### . . . It brings all kinds of hardships and suffering

*“We must endure many hardships to get into the kingdom of God.”* ACTS 14:22B ISV

[PETER, TO BELIEVERS:] *This brings you great joy, although you may have to suffer for a short time in various trials.* 1 PETER 1:6 NET

#### Spreading the gospel can result in suffering

[PAUL:] *My work is to be a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher. <sup>12</sup>That’s why I am suffering now.* 2 TIMOTHY 1:11–12A CEV

#### God’s people are hated

[JESUS, TO HIS DISCIPLES:] *If you belonged to the world, it would love you as it loves its own. But I have chosen you out of the world, so you don’t belong to it. That is why the world hates you.* JOHN 15:19 NCV™

## The Antichrist and the Final Persecution

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The Bible speaks of a figure of the end times that is opposed to God and Jesus Christ, and persecutes their people – a final “antichrist”. The first “beast” in Revelation is correlated by many with such a figure. However others consider it and the second beast that supports it to represent evil world systems rather than individual persons.

### The antichrist will have great authority and be worshiped

*He [the beast] was given ruling authority over every tribe, people, language, and nation, <sup>8</sup>and all those who live on the earth will worship the beast, everyone whose name has not been written since the foundation of the world in the book of life belonging to the Lamb who was killed.* REVELATION 13:7B–8 NET

This is speaking of the first “beast” of Revelation.

### Persecution of God’s people will increase in the end times – especially due to the antichrist

[JESUS, TO HIS DISCIPLES:] *Then they will hand you over to be persecuted and will kill you. You will be hated by all the nations because of my name.* MATTHEW 24:9 NET

*The beast was permitted to go to war against the saints and conquer them.* REVELATION 13:7A NET

### “Three and a half years” is given for the rule of the antichrist and intense persecution

*He will speak against the Supreme God and oppress God’s people. He will try to change their religious laws and festivals, and God’s people will be under his power for three and a half years.* DANIEL 7:25 GNT

In regard to the duration of the antichrist’s rule and the future period of intense persecution of believers, the Bible speaks of periods of time which are equivalent to three and a half years. Whether or not this is literal, such specifications are indicative of the period being predetermined by God. The period will end on Jesus Christ’s return, when the two beasts will be thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (cf. Revelation 19:19–20).

## God's Care of Persecuted Believers

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### God strengthens his people amidst trials

[PAUL, TO TIMOTHY:] Instead, *take your part in suffering for the Good News, as God gives you the strength to do it.* 2 TIMOTHY 1:8B GNT

[CHRIST, TO PAUL:] *“My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* [PAUL:] *So then, I will boast most gladly about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may reside in me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I am content with weaknesses, with insults, with troubles, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.* 2 CORINTHIANS 12:9B–10 NET

In weakness, hardship and/or persecution (v. 10a), Christ's power was perfected in Paul (v. 9). As such Paul could then say: “I am strong” (v. 10b).

### God rescues his people from trials

[GOD, TO JEREMIAH:] I will make you as strong as a wall to these people, a fortified wall of bronze. *They will attack you, but they will not be able to overcome you. For I will be with you to rescue you and deliver you,” says the LORD.* <sup>21</sup>*“I will deliver you from the power of the wicked. I will free you from the clutches of violent people.”* JEREMIAH 15:20–21 NET

[PAUL:] *I endured these persecutions and the Lord delivered me from them all.* 2 TIMOTHY 3:11B NET

### God will ultimately save believers from the persecution of the end times

[DANIEL, DESCRIBING A VISION:] While I was watching, *that horn began to wage war against the holy ones and was defeating them, <sup>22</sup>until the Ancient of Days arrived and judgment was rendered in favor of the holy ones of the Most High. Then the time came for the holy ones to take possession of the kingdom.* DANIEL 7:21–22 NET

The “horn” is understood by many to represent the antichrist.

Pray for the persecuted

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What kinds of persecution have you faced because of your faith?

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Believers in some countries face intense persecution. What obligations do we have to them as fellow believers? How can we support them?

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What is your understanding of the concept of an antichrist of the end times?

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What points should Christians bear in mind from the teachings about the time of the beast or antichrist, even in facing persecution in the present?

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Choose a verse or passage from the last section (*God's Care of Persecuted Believers*) that you find particularly striking or encouraging. How would you use it or find it helpful when facing persecution?

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## II. What to Do in Persecution

The Bible provides practical teaching on what to do when faced with persecution. Moreover, the Bible even provides good reasons to rejoice in spite of the suffering often involved in persecution. Not least of these reasons are the blessings that we can experience amidst such hardship – and those that we will receive in the future for enduring it.

### Be Faithful to God and Endure

#### Remain faithful to God and Jesus Christ

[JESUS CHRIST, TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM:] Do not be afraid of the things you are about to suffer. The devil is about to have some of you thrown into prison so you may be tested, and you will experience suffering for ten days. *Remain faithful even to the point of death*, and I will give you the crown that is life itself. ... <sup>13</sup>I know where you live – where Satan’s throne is. *Yet you continue to cling to my name and you have not denied your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed in your city where Satan lives.* REVELATION 2:10, 13 NET

The clause “where Satan’s throne is” (v. 13a) apparently refers to the city of Pergamum as a center of pagan worship, no doubt a hostile place to Christians. Note Antipas’s example (v. 13b) of being faithful “even to the point of death” (v. 10b).

#### Endure persecution

[JOHN:] If anyone is meant for captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed by the sword, then by the sword he must be killed. *This requires steadfast endurance* and faith from the saints.

REVELATION 13:10 NET

#### Consider and follow Jesus Christ’s example in suffering . . .

*Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought*

*nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right-hand side of God's throne. <sup>3</sup>Think of what he went through; how he put up with so much hatred from sinners! So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up.* HEBREWS 12:2–3 GNT

### **. . . and share in Jesus Christ's sufferings**

[PETER, TO BELIEVERS:] But be happy that *you are sharing in Christ's sufferings* so that you will be happy and full of joy when Christ comes again in glory. 1 PETER 4:13 NCV™

It was necessary for Christ to suffer in order to achieve God's objectives for him. Likewise those who are "in" him, must also be prepared to suffer in order to advance his cause. Quite possibly the NT writers had such a concept in mind when they wrote of sharing in Christ's sufferings.

## **Have Faith in God and Pray**

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### **Have faith and hope in God**

[PAUL:] For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. <sup>9</sup>Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But *that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.* <sup>10</sup>He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. *On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.* 2 CORINTHIANS 1:8–11 ESV

### **Do not be afraid**

[JESUS, TO HIS DISCIPLES:] *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.* Instead, fear the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup>*Aren't two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will.* <sup>30</sup>*Even all the hairs on your head are numbered.* <sup>31</sup>*So do not be afraid; you are more valuable than many sparrows.* MATTHEW 10:28–31 NET

### **Do not worry about what to say – you will be given what to say**

[JESUS, TO HIS DISCIPLES:] You will be brought before governors and kings because of me, to testify to them and to the gentiles. <sup>19</sup>When

they hand you over, *don't worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say, because in that hour what you are to say will be given to you.* <sup>20</sup>*It won't be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.* [MATTHEW 10:18–20](#) ISV

### **Pray to God, asking for help**

[THE EARLY BELIEVERS:] *And now, Lord, pay attention to their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your message with great courage,* <sup>30</sup>*while you extend your hand to heal, and to bring about miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.* [ACTS 4:29–30](#) NET

Note that the believers' prayer was for God to work through them amidst persecution, rather than simply for God to stop the persecution.

### **Bless and pray for those who persecute you**

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup>*bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.* [LUKE 6:27–28](#) NET

## **Rejoice**

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### **Rejoice because trials develop Christian character and virtues**

[PAUL:] *Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,* <sup>4</sup>*and endurance, character, and character, hope.* [ROMANS 5:3–4](#) NET

My brothers and sisters, *consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials,* <sup>3</sup>*because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance.* <sup>4</sup>*And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything.* [JAMES 1:2–4](#) NET

### **Rejoice because of rewards for enduring persecution**

*Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and insult you and reject you as evil on account of the Son of Man!* <sup>23</sup>*Rejoice in that day, and jump for joy, because your reward is great in heaven.* For their ancestors did the same things to the prophets. [LUKE 6:22–23](#) NET



## Blessings for Faithfulness in Persecution

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### Blessings amidst suffering

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is the Father who is full of mercy and all comfort. <sup>4</sup>*He comforts us every time we have trouble, so when others have trouble, we can comfort them with the same comfort God gives us.* <sup>5</sup>*We share in the many sufferings of Christ. In the same way, much comfort comes to us through Christ.* 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3–5 NCV™

*Throughout our lives we are always in danger of death for Jesus' sake, in order that his life may be seen in this mortal body of ours.* 2 CORINTHIANS 4:11 GNT

Jesus' "life" refers to his resurrection life – with its spiritual power for those who share in his suffering, suffering on his behalf.

### God's kingdom

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.* MATTHEW 5:10 NET

Note that this teaching probably has a present application as well as a future one.

### Eternal life

*Happy are those who remain faithful under trials, because when they succeed in passing such a test, they will receive as their reward the life which God has promised to those who love him.* JAMES 1:12 GNT

### Future glory

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] And if [we are] children, then heirs (namely, heirs of God and also fellow heirs with Christ) – *if indeed we suffer with him so we may also be glorified with him.* <sup>18</sup>*For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us.* ROMANS 8:17–18 NET

Pray for the persecuted

How do faith and hope inspire endurance (cf. 2 Thes 1:4; 1 Thes 1:3)?

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What attitude and actions should be part of our response to those who persecute us?

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How could you bring yourself to rejoice in persecution and difficulties?

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What would you do if you were experiencing persecution? How could you bring yourself to respond in the ways mentioned in this section?

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Choose a blessing of enduring persecution and difficulties – not necessarily from this chapter – that you can particularly relate to. (It may be one you have experienced or simply find encouraging.) Say why you chose it.

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  - II. God's Pre-Eminence
- 2. God's Character**
  - I. Holy Characteristics
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  - I. General
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## Persecuted Christians

Over 200 million Christians in at least 60 countries are denied basic human rights solely because of their faith. (Source: World Evangelical Alliance) Every year many Christians are killed because of their faith.

Through prayer, encouragement and practical assistance we can assist and fellowship with persecuted Christians in their suffering. You can play a vital part in this through contacting one of the organizations listed below. Most produce regular news/prayer letters.

**Barnabas Fund** – [www.barnabasfund.org](http://www.barnabasfund.org)

It provides material and spiritual support based on locally identified needs.

**Christian Solidarity International** – [csi-usa.org](http://csi-usa.org)

CSI works to defend religious liberty and help persecuted Christians.

**Christian Solidarity Worldwide** – [www.csw.org.uk](http://www.csw.org.uk)

It advocates for freedom of religion and justice for persecuted believers.

**Open Doors** – [www.opendoors.org](http://www.opendoors.org); [www.opendoors.org.au](http://www.opendoors.org.au)

It equips believers for persecution and maintaining a witness to the Gospel.

**Religious Liberty Commission** – [www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/rlc](http://www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/rlc)

RLC defends and aids persecuted Christians. See also [www.idop.org](http://www.idop.org).

**Religious Liberty Prayer Bulletin** – [rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com](http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com)

This site provides weekly prayer bulletins.

**The Bible League** – [bl.org.au/get-involved/bibles-for-the-persecuted](http://bl.org.au/get-involved/bibles-for-the-persecuted)

It supplies Bibles to persecuted Christians and provides training.

**Voice of the Martyrs** – [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com)

VOM helps persecuted Christians spread the gospel. It also gives material aid.

**World Watch Monitor** – [www.worldwatchmonitor.org](http://www.worldwatchmonitor.org)

It reports the story of Christians under pressure for their faith.

*Then the King will answer, 'I tell you the truth, anything you did for even the least of my people here, you also did for me.'* Matthew 25:40 NCV



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