

## Christ's followers bear the Cross

The word cross is used by some to describe any problem a Christian has. It is used to describe sickness, family problems, and such. The Bible uses the word cross in a narrow way. It refers to what Christians suffer for the sake of the gospel. Paul instructed new Christian converts on his first missionary journey, "*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God,*" (Acts 14:22). Paul's own life was evidence of this. He had to flee from Antioch and Iconium because of plots against him. At Lystra, Paul was stoned and left for dead.

Jesus told His disciples, "*If anyone wants to follow Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me!*" (Mark 8:34). Following Jesus involves suffering persecution for His sake. When Jesus sent the twelve apostles out on their ministry, He told them to expect persecution. He said, "*You see, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.... be on your guard against men! For they will hand you over to councils and will flog you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings because of Me, to testify to them and to the Gentiles. You will also be hated by all people because of My name. Nevertheless, he who endures to the end will be saved,*" (Matt. 10:16-18, 22).

Jesus did not say that all people would love Christians. He said all people will hate them. This is because the world hates Jesus. Unbelievers look at the Gospel with a mind corrupted by sin and with a will in rebellion against God. Sinners by nature have no love for Jesus. Thus, they also have no love for those who belong to Jesus.

Christians sometimes think that God should spare them from the cross. They think that since God loves us and is almighty, He should keep us from suffering persecution for the sake of the gospel. Peter had to deal with this attitude in the Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor. He wrote, "<sup>12</sup> *Dearly loved people, do not be astonished at the fiery ordeal among you, by which you are being tested, as though something strange were happening to you!* <sup>13</sup> *However, rejoice in as far as you share in Christ's sufferings, so that you may also rejoice and be very glad when His glory is revealed!... if anyone suffers as a Christian, he should not be ashamed, but should glorify God for that name!*" (1 Peter 4:12-13, 16). The psalmist Asaph was troubled by what he saw in this world. He observed that the wicked seemed to prosper in this life. On the other hand, believers seemed to suffer for their faith. Asaph was only able to put things in their proper perspective when he remembered the eventual end of an unbeliever under God's judgment and the eventual glory of a believer in heaven (Ps 73:1-24).

Luther was well acquainted with suffering for the sake of the gospel. He wrote: For no one can believe how the devil opposes and obstructs their [the first two petitions] fulfilment. He cannot

bear to have anyone teach or believe rightly. It pains him beyond measure when his lies and abominations, honoured under the most specious pretexts of God's name, are disclosed and exposed in all their shame.

...Therefore, we who would be Christians must surely expect to have the devil with all his angels and the world as our enemies and must expect that they will inflict every possible misfortune and grief upon us. For where God's Word is preached, accepted, or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind. (LC Third Part:62, 65)

What will be our attitude toward those who persecute us, especially to those who will continue along the path that leads away from God. As our nation continues its deadly assault on morality, where abortions are allowed, homosexuality is a person's free choice etc., and now even euthanasia is receiving a renewed push to become legal, when we stand up to oppose such abominations, we can expect persecution. What are we to do? Jesus said, "*I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who are persecuting you,* <sup>45</sup> *that you may be the children of your Father in heaven!*" (Matt. 5:44-45). Jesus prayed for those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). In the face of slander, a Christian offers prayer. In the face of evil, a Christian offers forgiveness. The strength for doing this comes from God's love for sinners. Only God's love can move us to forgive those who persecute us.