

## PERSECUTION

All around the world, Christians are persecuted for their faith. Their houses of worship are destroyed. Their Bible is banned or revised beyond recognition. Their right to exercise religious freedom is denied. In the most publicised cases, they are imprisoned or murdered for their faith.

In the West, the common forms of Christian persecution are cultural and financial. There are boycotts against Christian businesses, violent protests against Christian groups and a developing culture of complacency about hostility to Christian figureheads. Israel Folau is a test case for the tolerance of discrimination against Christians in Australia. Now that he has been found to have committed a “high-level breach” of the Professional Players’ Code of Conduct over controversial social media posts, we wait to see what punishment will be handed to him. There is a high probability that his professional playing career will be over. The Australian Labor Party has now also come out and stated that if it forms government after the upcoming federal election, they have plans to ban all anti-gay speech through a strengthening of the Anti-Discrimination Act. This means that if anyone says or posts something that is anti-gay etc., then they will be exposed to criminal sanction. This will also have implications to what the church preaches publicly from its pulpits, because Labor has stated that there will be no exceptions – not only as individuals, but also religious organisations will be hauled before the courts if they speak out against someone’s chosen lifestyle.

Israel Folau was raised as a Mormon, but later in life converted to the Assemblies of God church. While not everything he has stated while quoting the Scriptures is correct (which shows up in his AOG beliefs), however, what he stated in his latest social media post which caused a stir is quite correct. He stated: “WARNING. Drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists, idolaters. Hell awaits you. Repent! Only Jesus saves.” These words are based on 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. All Folau was asking for is that such people repent. It is not hate-speech, but a simple warning. It is strange too how it appears that it is only the homosexuals Folau has offended. I haven’t heard of the drunks, adulterers, etc., complaining about what he posted! And it is also interesting too that in the media, they conveniently leave the last few words off, namely, the part that says, “Repent! Only Jesus saves.” They do not want to mention the name “Jesus” at all.

What Israel Folau is suffering as a Christian is nothing new. Jesus once stated: <sup>10</sup> “*Blessed are those who have been persecuted because of righteousness! For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” <sup>11</sup> “*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you, because of Me!*” <sup>12</sup> *Rejoice and be very glad! For your reward in heaven is great. For in this way people persecuted the prophets who were before you,*” (Matthew 5:10-12).

If we are persecuted or punished for wrongdoing, we have no reason to complain. If we break the speed limit, don’t complain about the speeding ticket! But we must also expect to suffer at times for saying and doing what is right. That was what happened to Jesus, and He warns in the above text that we must not expect any better treatment from the unbelieving world. Peter too encourages us, “<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!*” (1 Peter 4:12-13).

We don’t want to deliberately antagonise people and invite persecution, but neither do we want to flee from it when we are called upon to endure suffering for the sake of God’s truth and justice. When Paul suffered persecution in one place, he would move on to another city, but his primary concern was always the advancement of Christ’s kingdom, not his personal comfort or convenience. Paul’s example can be an inspiration for us.

When persecution for the sake of Jesus, who enacts God’s saving righteousness, does happen, Jesus promises His blessing. The reign of heaven and its blessings already belong to believers in such difficult times, just as those blessings belong to all who have nothing to offer to God, who are poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3).

The Apostle Paul has wise word for us too when we are suffering from persecution. He says, “<sup>35</sup> *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*” <sup>36</sup> *As Scripture has said: “For Your sake we are being killed all day long. We have been considered as sheep to be slaughtered,”* (Romans 8:35-36).

Paul doesn’t give the Romans, or us, any assurance that things like trouble, hardship, persecution, or famine won’t happen. Rather, he operates with the assumption that they will happen. He cites Scripture to support his point. With his quotation he’s saying that our situation is exactly like the one the psalmist wrote about in Psalm 44:22: We’re like sheep being led to slaughter. Nor should that surprise us. Jesus told His disciples: “*If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me,*” (Matthew 16:24).

The situation continues to look desperate, but will it separate us from our Saviour-God?

Far from being overcome, we are the ones who shall overcome and be the conquerors. In fact, Paul promises even more! Literally, he says that we shall be “hyper-victorious,” or “super-conquerors.” That, however, is no credit to us, because it will not come about by anything we do. It will not be accomplished by our love and devotion for the Lord. Rather, it is entirely the other way around. We’re conquerors “*through Him who loved us,*” (Rom. 8:37). When it is His love that carries the day, then nothing in all creation “*will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,*” (Rom. 8:39). Nothing can offset, or counterbalance, the love God has for us. Wherever we go and whatever our circumstances, God’s love is there to protect us (see Psalm 139). Such is the love the triune God has lavished on us and continues to lavish on us. He chose us from eternity; now in time He calls us to faith; and He will keep us in that faith until we reach eternal glory.

Let the world continue in its persecution of Christians. If the world decides to reject Christ, then it will reject us. All we can do is continue to let our light shine, praying that there will be some who will hear the message, repent, and turn to Christ.