

Where are the top 5 places in the world, where you wouldn't want to live if you were a Christian? According to a Christian group called "Open Door" that studies the persecution of Christians in the world, these are the top 5 hotspots for 2011: Number 1 is North Korea. It has been on the top of the list for 9 straight years. Number 2 for 2011 is Iran. Under the kingdom's strict interpretation of Islamic law, apostasy (conversion to another religion) is punishable by death if the accused does not recant. Number 3 for 2011 is Afghanistan. Number 4 is Saudi Arabia. And rounding out number 5 is Somalia.

Have you ever heard the word, "xenophobia?" It means a fear of strangers or foreigners? All through history people have been suspicious of strangers and even driven them out of their lands. Because we are Christians we are in this world but not part of this world. We even sing a hymn that says, "I'm but a stranger here. Heaven is my home." The closer you live your life to Jesus Christ and the more you love him for all he has done for you, the more weird and strange and different you will be to the world around you. And it will cause the world to pick on you. Don't be surprised if painful suffering comes your way!"

We sometimes forget that we're in a spiritual battle. Once you are a Christian, you become the enemy of the devil. The Bible says, Ephesians 6:12 "We're not fighting against human beings but wicked spiritual forces." The Bible calls the devil, the accuser of the brethren. Satan would like to hurt God, but he can't. So he does the next best thing. He tries to hurt His children, you, because you are a believer. If you really wanted to hurt me, the easiest way is to hurt my kids. You hurt my kids you hurt me. Satan tries to get back at God by hurting His children, those whose faith is in Christ. So don't be surprised when it comes.

Further, you can actually rejoice when it does happen. v. 13 "But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ..." Circle the word "rejoice". He says, don't complain, celebrate. Don't have a pity party, have a party. That sounds like masochism, a martyr complex, something ridiculous. But the key word is the word rejoice. It doesn't say "enjoy when you're put down for Christ," it says "rejoice". There's a big difference between enjoyment and rejoicing. Enjoyment means getting pleasure out of something. Rejoicing means choosing to have a positive attitude in spite of it. God doesn't say enjoy persecution; He says rejoice in it. Keep a positive attitude. Why?

Suffering draws me closer to God. He says, You participate in the sufferings of Christ, Circle the word "partner". In Greek it is the word koinia, that's the word for fellowship. Fellowship means you get to know somebody up close and personal. Closeness, intimacy, commonness. It says when you suffer for Jesus' name you have fellowship with Christ. It draws you closer to Him. When you go through suffering with anybody, it always bonds you to them. Ask any war veteran. The suffering that they went through bonds them together. Or when people go through a disaster, it brings them closer together. Or when families experience the same problem, it brings them closer together. It says when you suffer for doing the right thing it draws you closer to God, to Christ.

Secondly, It means that God can be seen in my life. When you're having a tough time for Jesus' sake, it means God can be seen in my life. I Pet. 4:14 "When people insult you because you follow Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of God is with you." Remember how the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in form of dove at his baptism. It was

a way of marking Jesus, pointing him out and saying, “This is the Christ!” When you suffer for Christ the Spirit of glory rests on you and points to you saying, “These are the people who believe in Jesus.” The Holy Spirit personally marks you as a Christian.

Third, we can rejoice because we have a fantastic undeserved reward awaiting us. Listen to what Jesus said in his famous Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and say all kinds of evil about you. Rejoice because your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way the persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Those who are persecuted for their faith will have a double joy when Jesus returns in glory. They will see their Lord Jesus and also see clearly how their sufferings for Christ gave glory to him and promoted the honor of his name. One Roman historian wrote about the Christians who died in persecution, “They seem to die happy they are going to a better world.”

Persecution is a time for praise. Christians are like a different kind of “grape”. The average person, when squeezed, produces sour juice. Troubles come, and out comes grumbling and griping and complaining. When you squeeze a Christian, though, something different happens. Out comes a sweet song of praise! When Paul and Silas were thrown in prison, they started praying and singing hymns to God. It was midnight. An earthquake came and the doors flew open and the chains came loose, but not one of the other prisoners tried to escape! As a result, the jailer and his whole family were converted and baptized. Peter writes, “If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.” (4:16)

Be careful too if you suffer, that it doesn't come from bad behavior. “If you suffer, it should not be as murderer or thief or any kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.” Sometimes we suffer because we do bad things. Galatians tells us, “What a man sows he shall also reap.” If you are nasty to people, don't complain, “Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, guess I'll just have to go and eat worms.” If you open yourselves up to immorality, don't complain if your life becomes a stinking mess. The newspaper is full of stories from the lives of people who are suffering because they do not follow God's ways. If we suffer, let it not be for bad behavior but for standing up for Jesus Christ.

But one thing that can get in the way of standing up for Jesus, is what other people might think of us. We want so much to be accepted by others, that at times, when they question Christian values and principles, we sheepishly keep our mouths closed, as if we are ashamed of what we believe and stand for. The writer Peter emphasizes to us that we should refuse to be ashamed. Don't be intimidated by cynics, by critics, don't run from situations that put your faith on trial. People are watching you every moment of the day. We've talked about this before. People watch you all the time. If you claim to be a believer, unbelievers will throw stuff at you just to see how you react. They will. They want to know if your faith is genuine. Does your walk match your talk? Peter says, Don't be embarrassed for your faith, for your values. Stand up for what you believe in!.

The problem really is the fear of rejection. We're afraid of what other people will think of us. What's the antidote? First of all, Realize that you don't need the approval of everybody in order to be happy in life. Whether you approve of me or not has nothing to do with my happiness. Secondly, Be more concerned with what God thinks about you, than what other people think bout you. That's called spiritual maturity. When you think more about what God thinks about you than what other people think about you, that's

what's going to last. "Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires; the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Peter says, "If you suffer as a Christian, don't be ashamed, but praise God that you bear His name."

Think too, if we Christians have to face this kind of hostility in this life, how will it be in the Judgment for those who refuse to believe in Christ as their Savior. A horrid future awaits those who do not believe. If my pain helps one more person escape the final judgment, it will all be worth it.

How long will our persecutions last? I don't know. I'm not God. I'm a fellow sufferer, like you. Daniel spent one night in the lion's den, whereas Peter was delivered from death row by an angel who miraculously released him, but John the Baptist was delivered only by death—but that was the ultimate deliverance! Either way, the point finally is that God does provide deliverance from Satan for those who wait for his plans to be carried out. It says in I Peter, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power forever and ever

May the same resolve we saw in Bible characters and our Savior Jesus be found in us. May we stand up always for our faith and consider it a privilege, to share in a small way the sufferings our Savior endured for us, that we might have lasting peace with God. Stand up, now, For Jesus. Amen.