

What does the New Testament say about persecution?



The New Testament includes the gospels, four accounts of the life of Jesus. 'Gospel' means 'good news'. In the gospels, Jesus is described teaching that his disciples would face rejection even from their own families, as well from as the religious leaders of the day.

In the following passage, Jesus is speaking to his disciples, warning them that they will be persecuted for following him. Christian tradition holds that many of the disciples were indeed killed for their faith. Many Christians understand this passage in a more general way as well, warning all Christians that they might face persecution.

'As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to **councils**; and you will be beaten in **synagogues**; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations. When they bring you to trial and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given to you at the time, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.'

Mark chapter 13 verses 9-13 (NRSV)

The **councils** were the legal authorities and the **synagogues** were the places of worship in Israel at the time Jesus lived.

What forms of persecution does Jesus warn the disciples that they will suffer?

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for **righteousness**' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people **revile** you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the **prophets** who were before you.'

'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'

Matthew chapter 5 verses 10-12 and 43-45 (NRSV)

Righteousness is being free from guilt or sin and leading a life which is pleasing to God.

To **revile** someone is to be verbally abusive and insulting to them.

Many of the **prophets** in the Old Testament were persecuted, such as Elijah, Amos and Jeremiah.

Many people of Jesus' day believed that suffering happened to people as a punishment because they had done something wrong. It would have been challenging for them to hear that people who were persecuted would be blessed by God. Jesus wasn't saying that to be persecuted was a good thing, but that people who are persecuted will receive God's blessing, love and support.

Compare how the author of Psalm 7 responded to persecution with what Jesus said about it in the passage from Matthew's Gospel

In Psalm 7, the author:

- claimed he was innocent
- cried out for safety
- wanted the persecutors to change their ways
- called on God to judge them
- wanted revenge

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says that:



How difficult is loving your enemies when you are being persecuted? Why do you think Jesus suggested love rather than hitting back?

Give three examples of the teachings of Jesus which could help Christians face persecution today.

Now learn more about Christianity and persecution by watching the video at:

biblesociety.org.uk/e/persecution



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