HISTORY OF PERSECUTION IN THE CHURCH

Persecution of the church means the pursuing of the church to harm, ill treat or to destroy it.

How did this come about? It came about from the beginning in Genesis when the Lord God cursed the serpent (Satan) for beguiling Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In Genesis chapter 3 verse 15, The Lord God said

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed
He shall crush your head
and you shall bruise His heel.”

Thus, the persecution of the church was ordained by the Lord God Himself. It is therefore, of necessity that the church will be persecuted. For those who are going through persecution, it is important to know that persecution will not destroy the church of Christ. Why, because the Lord Jesus has said
“...on this rock I will build My church and the gates of hades (hell) will not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18).

Therefore, it does not matter about the intensity of the persecution, the church of Christ will certainly prevail. The Apostle Paul said
“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written:
‘For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.’
Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)

To those who are being persecuted: it is necessary for the growth of individuals and of the church as a whole. The church becomes stronger, more focused and relentlessly diligent when under persecution. In the parable of the sower, (Mark 4:1-20) especially verse 17, the seed sown on the stony ground are those who have no root in themselves and they only endure for some time. When tribulation or persecution arises for the word’s sake, immediately they stumble. There will be persecution on account of the word of God. Please read Acts 8.

To those who have not yet been persecuted:

“Remember the prisoners (for Christ’s sake) as though chained with them – those who are mistreated – since you yourselves are in the body also.” (Hebrews 13:3)
The church was born out of persecution. The Lord Jesus went through most horrific persecution which ended up being whipped with the blows that cut deep into His body and finally, He was crucified and experienced excruciating pain for the sin of the whole world. Infact, to be part of the body of Jesus, one has to be baptised into His death, buried with Him in baptism in order to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:3-4) After this, one has to carry ones cross daily to qualify as a disciple of Jesus. To carry your cross means to be prepared to die for Jesus. (Matthew 10v38)

To the church of Christ in Smyrna which was going through persecution, The Lord Jesus said
“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”
God does not expect a disciple of Jesus to fear death. (Revelation 2:10,11)

“And do not fear those who kill the body but can not kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28). The only One to fear is God.

“For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come – all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”
(1 Corinthians 3:21-23). Stand firm in your faith in the Lord Jesus. You will be rewarded!

Indeed, without persecution, the church would not exist on earth today because it would be too weak.
“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philippians 1:29).

It is a great privilege to suffer persecution for the sake of Christ. We were told by the Lord Jesus, to rejoice and be exceedingly glad when persecuted, for great is our reward. Even if we have to die for Him, we must remember that He first died for us. We are to give our life for one another. Please read John 3:15, 1John 3:16 and Revelation 2:10

The Lord Jesus Christ said
“Remember the words that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you. If they keep My words, they will keep yours also.’”

Who are they who persecute the church? They are the seed of the serpent - the children of the devil. They will persecute the church but will not prevail against it. Those others who persecuted the church do so out of ignorance because they are not enlightened. John 16:1-3. The former do not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, meaning that Jesus Christ is God who came in human flesh. The latter are those who do not know what they are doing. They think by persecuting the church the body of Christ they are offering service to God. Saul of Tarsus who later became an Apostle of Christ did exactly that. He persecuted the church of Jesus unto death.

“And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he has said this, he fell asleep (that is, he died). Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and
Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.’

Paul said, “I am in deed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city (that is, Jerusalem) at the feet of Gamaliel. Taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted this Way (that is, this Faith) to the death, binding and delivering into prison men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went Damascus to bring in chains even those who were thereto Jerusalem to be punished.” Acts: 22:3-5.

What is the purpose of persecution?

- To give the church the opportunity to produce patience (Greek: hupomone).
- It is to refine the church as gold is refined by fire.
- To separate the true disciples from the false disciples.
- To bring increase to the church. To enable the church to win more souls for Jesus. Please read 1 Peter 4:12-19 and James 1:2-4.
- To bring seriousness, clarity and fixity of purpose to the church.
- To draw the church closer to the Lord Jesus’ separating the faithful from the unfaithful.

In conclusion, the Lord Jesus Christ has called us out of the world to be witnesses unto Him after being born again and received the Holy Spirit. He said,

“Then they will deliver you to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My Name’s sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness (wickedness) will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.” (Matthew 24:9-14).

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