

From Section 4: Alluring Idols

*“The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.” Psalm 16:4*

Common Sin Struggles of Pastors and Their Wives: Desiring Protection from the World

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. –John 15:18-20, NIV

A GOOD THING

Desiring protection from the world is a good thing. It is an echo of the perfect world without sin that God created for us to peacefully and happily enjoy. And it is a glimmer of the world to come, in which there will never be any opposition to God or brokenness of sin that can make us unsafe anymore.

A GOOD THING GONE BAD

But now, in the “Now and Not Yet,” there IS opposition and there IS danger. And, there are choices as to where we go to find the safety we desire, not all of them God-pleasing. This is why longing for this good thing can be a tempting sin struggle.

Gospel Opposition

Jesus promised persecution for being His followers and the world has most definitely delivered! The gospel that we love stands opposed to gods and demi-gods they bow down to. There are those who would hurt us or even kill us to stop the gospel.

Their Gods Are False Gods

Did you realize that most of the world even now, worship literal idols—statues not unlike the ones in David’s day. In America and in Europe, this might sound like an oddity, unless perhaps your Asian American and you’re visiting your grandmother’s house who immigrated from China and brought her idols with her. But if you live in Asia or Africa, or even parts of South America, idol worship is a big deal.

If you become a Christian, you have to renounce these idols, turning your back on family and what you used to rely upon. And THAT is a big deal! If you are a pastor, you are preaching to your congregation to renounce these idols. But even the religions without graven image, such as Islam, we offend by rejecting their gods and their sacred writings.

Add to this, the pseudo-religions of cultural norms, government regulations, political views, racial views, and now even gender identity, and you have pretty much covered the reasons why Christians are persecuted, jailed, and killed over the past two thousand years. And even though in America, we are not yet jailed or killed for these things, we are increasingly persecuted for how our biblical stances.

Gospel Location

Sometimes it’s not so much opposition to the gospel that you struggle with, but simply the danger in the area where your church is located.

This was a concern we took into consideration when we moved to a very different Capitol Hill over 30 years ago. The kids and I arrived here ahead of Mark, and I remember being scared enough to have all three of us sleep in the same bed, with our new “watch dog” and with the phone of our neighbor and a heavy metal rod next to the bed. We were told which streets were safe to walk on and which areas to drive in. We heard gun fire and had helicopters circle our block over and over for hours at night as they were looking for someone on the run. Robberies and murder happened quite near to us. One woman was killed as she let her dog out in the middle of the night. I’m sure our D.C. story is nothing compared to many, but it played into our decision-making and my struggle with fear.

THE TEMPTATIONS FOR PASTORS/THEIR WIVES

When persecution is the concern, it may be tempting to want to hide the truths that don’t just make us unpopular, but may be the excuse for others to harm us.

In countries open to the gospel, maybe the “persecution” comes through insults or exclusions from our neighbors, community, and the media. Maybe, shootings of church members or our buildings set on fire. There certainly are growing government sanctions in the United States and around the world against those who do not legitimize the LGBTQ+ lifestyles.

In closed countries, such as China, the government already blocks the spread of Christian literature and forbids gospel preaching churches to meet. Churches are shut down, and members (particularly pastors) are imprisoned, if caught. In other countries where Islam or Hinduism is the religion of the culture and/or the State, foreigners who come to preach the gospel can be hurt or deported; nationals can be tortured or killed.

Will our husbands and us struggle to water down the gospel? To shut up about sin and its consequences? To choose language that sounds more inclusive than it actually is? To be a chameleon who looks like one thing to the world, yet to another in the church?

What harm will come to my husband or even me? How will we endure that? Who will take care of me or our children if something happens to him? What will happen to the church? Will we lose our ability to worship? Will we stand or fall under suffering and persecution? Will we risk speaking to nationals in closed countries about the gospel, to disciple them, to let them worship with us when their presence among us could lead to how expulsion and to their death?

Will my husband’s words wind up getting him arrested one day? It has happened in the UK already. My temptation is to want to run and hide, not to be like Peter and John and the believers who praised God for suffering for Jesus. Or Paul who was happy, who counted it all joy to be filling up in his body the sufferings of Christ.

As well as struggles for their own protection, pastors and their wives struggle over the well-being of the believers who come from families who are devoutly Muslim, Hindu or other religions. How do they help protect these new believers’ lives while encouraging them proclaim their allegiance to Christ? Among singles, how do they help find Christian spouses rather than be forced to marry the non-believing person their family designates for them? How can the church family be new family to those who are cut off from their biological family because of Christ?

In cases of pastoring in an unsafe ministry location, our struggles may center on our children's well-being by bringing them to live in an area where they might be in danger. As some relatives cautioned us when we were considering coming to DC: "Are you sure you are doing the best thing for your kids by exposing them to such danger with all those shootings around you?" And, while we may hold to a strong belief in God's protection over our family, pressure from family and our own fear may tempt us to want to choose a more "controlled" suburban environment to be in ministry.

In all these situations, are we tempted to hate those who oppose the gospel, who hurt us, or who bring the crime that makes us feel unsafe?

No wonder we are tempted to seek for protection from the world in the wrong places! Evil seems so strong and its weapons against us may put our very lives at stake. How do we fight this temptation?

RECOGNIZE THE ROOTS

Examine your temptations and look at your heart's desires that are at the root. These can help us see where we need to fight sin where it starts. You might find desires like this, when you struggle with desiring protection from the world:

Holding Tightly to This Life:

- I don't want our lives to be "cut short."
- I don't want my husband, my family, other believers to suffer.
- I don't want to lose the good things in life our family enjoys.

Wanting Control:

- Is God really sovereign over persecution that might come our way?
- I want to make sure He doesn't let my husband/me suffer.
- Will God protect our family from harm in our neighborhood?

Fearing Abandonment:

- Will God take care of us if my husband loses his livelihood?
- Who will take care of our kids if we are killed and they are left behind?
- Will the church still persevere in persecution?

Will Fail to Remain Faithful to God in Persecution:

- Will I stay true to God and choose to suffer or even die?
- Will I know what to say to honor God?
- Will I retaliate with hatefulness or allow my heart to become bitter, if my family suffers for the gospel?

Will Not Know How to Best Help New Believers as They Deal with Persecution:

- Will I be responsible for their torture or death by saying the wrong thing?
- Will the church be able to care well for those who are cut off from their family?
- What is the best way to stand for Christ, yet be wise in persecution?

Heart Will Be Filled with Hate, Bitterness or Unforgiveness towards Others:

- Can I keep on loving my enemies, even though they make our lives so hard and impede the gospel?

TACKLE LIES WITH TRUTH

However slick or legitimate our sin struggles look, we know that with sin, there is a good desire believing a bad lie. Look to God's Word for truth to replace the lies.

Holding Tightly onto This Life:

Life with Christ in heaven will be even better than whatever we hold dearest or find most enjoyable here. The best is yet to come!

"I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. --Philippians 1:20-23, NIV

"Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded." --Hebrews 10:33-35

Wanting Control:

God is in control! He has our lives all planned out. He knows our days. No enemy or dangerous location can cut short our lives or our children's lives.

"Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. --Psalm 139:7, ESV

"For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Ephesians 2:10, NIV

Fearing Abandonment:

Nothing can separate us from God. He will always take care of my husband and my family. We cannot be abandoned because He is always with us.

"What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. --Romans 8:32-39, NIV

Will Fail to Remain Faithful to God in Persecution:

God is at work in us. He will help us fulfill all of His plans for us. He will give us the words, the courage and the strength to hold firm to our faith in Him.

“Look, I’m sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as serpents and as harmless as doves. Because people will hand you over to sanhedrins and flog you in their synagogues, beware of them. You will even be brought before governors and kings because of Me, to bear witness to them and to the nations. But when they hand you over, don’t worry about how or what you should speak. For you will be given what to say at that hour, because you are not speaking, but the Spirit of your Father is speaking through you. --Matthew 10:16-20, HCSB

“And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. 2 Corinthians 9:8, ESV

Will Not Know How to Best Help New Believers as They Deal with Persecution:

God will give us what is needed to do all He calls us to do.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.” –James 1:5, NIV

Heart Filled with Hate, Bitterness, and Unforgiveness towards Enemies:

God sees your enemies and calls you to mirror Him in your graciousness towards them. He will reward you greatly.

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.... You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” –Matthew 5:12, 43-45, HCSB

RUN TO GOD

Ask Him to work in your heart and give you confidence in His promises. Ask Him to help you entrust your life to God, your Father, just like Jesus did. Hold up the promises of God’s Word to God. Ask Him to fulfill them in your husband’s and your life. Ask Him to strengthen you and make the desire of your heart to honor Him outweigh even this earthly life. Ask Him to make you like Stephen, who responded with prayer and love to those who insulted and killed him. Pray for your enemies that God might open their eyes to the truth of the gospel, just like He did Paul’s.

REACH OUT TO OTHERS

Ask others to join you in prayer for boldness, like the church did in Acts 4:31. Ask them to pray for the gospel to continue to go out, even in the face of persecution. Their prayers will be fundamental to sustaining you in your difficult ministry situation.

Ask the advice of those who have faced similar persecution what they have done, practically and spiritually, to be shrewd in the face of persecution to help the church be able to keep meeting, to not unduly inflame enemies by your actions, yet to stay true to spread and preach the gospel. Ask them how God has helped them fight their fear of persecution.

Ask others who share your neighbor or have lived in other dangerous locations for practical advice. If Christians, ask them about fears they have struggled with and how God has helped them.

ARMED AND READY

In the Moment:

“But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear or be disturbed, but honor the Messiah as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. However, do this with gentleness and respect, keeping your conscience clear, so that when you are accused, those who denounce your Christian lifewill be put to shame.” –1 Peter 3:14-16

Set your mind to expect suffering. Jesus promised it. (John 16:33) But, He also promised that He has overcome the world. Set your mind to expect Him to help you as you face it.

If you tend to be slow on your feet or quick to be angry or unkind when confronted by insults or faced with suffering, take time to write down a God-honoring defense. Ask God to put those words in your memory and soak into the attitude of your heart. You might never use this “script” as written, but will bless your prayers and can prepare your mind with better words in the moment.

Social media can also be a place where Christians can be easily insulted and unfortunately, easily retaliate in a manner not worthy of the gospel. If you are offended by someone’s words, see it as an opportunity to love your enemies and commend the gospel.

In the Church:

Hopefully, your husband will be one of a group of elders who can together pray and make good decisions for your church regarding response to persecution. Or, if a sole pastor, can be in contact with other elders/pastors at other churches facing similar persecution for advice. As 1 Peter 3:14-16 pointed out: there is no time like being wrongly treated to commend the gospel through our godly, loving response. If your husband or your church has any opportunity to respond publicly to mistreatment, ask God to help you do this in love and to His glory to commend the gospel.

Build or ask God to bring a strong core of brother and sister believers to work alongside you in your ministry situation. Especially in closed countries, they will be your God-provided life support system in the day to day struggles to keep on trusting in God and to keep on doing gospel work.

In Your Strategy:

Scheme with those who think of ways to get the gospel literature into closed countries. Strategize how you can live peaceably with your government and your community, with those who oppose you, yet stand strong in the gospel. Be wise in your contacts with those in closed countries who are interested in the gospel or who accept the gospel. How can you both help them grow and worship, yet protect them and you from suspicion that might lead to persecution or expulsion. Plan what your family or your church will do when persecution comes.

Read

Stories of God’s faithfulness to His people in times of suffering. Such as *The Shadow of the Almighty* (Jim and Elisabeth Elliott), *To the Golden Shore* (Adoniram Judson), *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel*, and *Evidence Not Seen* (Darlene Deibler Rose) as realistic stories of persecution, loss, and God’s provision and blessing through them.

REPENT ON REPEAT PLEASES GOD

Living in a world offended by the gospel gives us many opportunities to face persecution and to fear persecution. God is kind to forgive us and help us keep on fighting to trust Him and to respond in a God-honoring way to our enemies and to the insults and suffering they bring on us. God is pleased with our fight and is the One who will help us fight.

YOUR MERCIFUL HIGH PRIEST

Jesus knows your struggle! He, too, was tempted to choose safety rather than suffering. Satan used Peter to tempt Jesus to turn away from the suffering of the cross, but Jesus said “no.”

“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” –Matthew 18:21-23, ESV

He was insulted, beaten and killed, yet God helped Him to endure it by remembering the joy to come.

“[Let us fix] our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” –Hebrews 12:2, NIV
He who endured all of this is tender-hearted towards us and able to help us through the insults and suffering from the world we face.

Questions for You

1. How do you/have you desired to be protected from the world?
2. Has this led to any sin struggles for you? Have any of these been heightened by or caused by the fact that your husband is in the ministry?
3. What has helped you in these struggles?
4. Do you have any other words of wisdom for people with this struggle?