

Editorial: Thinking about the New Covenant and Persecution

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When we compare and contrast life under the old covenant versus life under the new covenant there are a number of differences which immediately come to mind. Obviously the greatest difference is what the old covenant typified and anticipated has now come to pass in Christ. So, for example, and certainly not limited to these points, circumcision has given way to its fulfillment, namely the coming of Christ, his glorious cross work, and the reality that the entire community of Christ's people is now a regenerate people, born of the Spirit, in contrast to the mixed nature of Israel. Or, the sacrificial system tied to the entire priestly work has now given way to the work of our great High Priest, who by the offering of himself has brought to fulfillment what the old system pointed forward to, namely the full atonement of our Lord and the accomplishment of our justification before God. In many, many ways the old covenant in all of its structures, types, and patterns has reached its *telos*, terminus, and fulfillment in Christ.

However, there is also another way in which the old is different than the new covenant. When one thinks of the words, "suffering" and "persecution," it is important to think through how these concepts differ depending upon which covenant we live under. Generally speaking, under the old covenant,

one of the great blessings of that covenant was that the people of God were *not* to suffer and experience persecution if they remained faithful to the Lord. So, for example, when one reads Deuteronomy 27-28, one is struck by the fact that if the people obeyed God, they would have received not only physical and material wealth but also victory over their enemies. Yet, conversely, if they disobeyed God, they would experience the curses of the covenant, namely, various forms of suffering and persecution. Now it is important to quickly note that this is generally speaking. Even old covenant believers lived in light of Adam's sin and thus experienced the reality of death. In fact, this is one of the reasons why the book of Job is so important in the OT canon. Without it, one could get the false impression that the blessings of God are always material and physical and that it is only due to sin that we experience God's curse. Obviously, given Adam's sin, this is not the case and Job clearly reminds us that there is such a thing as a righteous sufferer even in the OT era. Yet, with that said, under the old covenant, more often than not, suffering and persecution is identified with disobedience and disregard for God's covenantal demands.

Under the new covenant, however, this is certainly *not* the case. Given that our Lord Jesus Christ has experienced suffering to glory in order to accomplish our salvation, we too, yet not for exactly the same reasons, are called to suffer and experience persecution for his name's sake. In fact, under the new covenant, generally speaking, suffering and persecution is not primarily due to our disobedience (except in the case of our sin), but it is the result of our faithfulness and obedience to the Lord. As Paul reminds us, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (1 Tim 3:12, ESV). Or, as our Lord himself teaches about who the truly blessed person is and what kingdom life is all about: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt 5:10-12, ESV).

This staggering change of covenantal emphasis is not something the Western church has taken seriously or done justice to, especially in the last century where we have lived in relative peace and calm. Among us has grown up all kinds of health and wealth gospels which have distorted the teaching of Scripture, led Christians to have false expectations, and which have failed to account for kingdom life as lived under the new covenant. No doubt, throughout the history of the church and even in our own day, a majority of

the church has experienced and known what it means to suffer and be persecuted for Christ's sake as new covenant believers. Even as I write this editorial, we hear of an increase of persecution against Christians in many parts of the world. What has been fairly common throughout church history (and even today outside first world countries), is now coming to the West, but are we ready for it? One of the main reasons why our last issue of *SBJT* and this current issue have focused on the themes of suffering and persecution in Scripture and Church history is to prepare Christians, especially in the West, for what we will certainly experience and, in truth, what we should expect to experience as faithful new covenant believers. Before the difficult times arise, we need to think anew about what Scripture teaches on these important subjects, as well as learn lessons from Christians throughout the ages, in order to stand strong and faithful to our Lord today.

It is for this reason that we offer this issue of *SBJT* on the theme of persecution. Starting with the biblical data of how we should think about true persecution, and then turning to the lessons of Church history, our aim is to prepare the Western church to live out our calling as new covenant believers, living between the times, as we await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is our goal that as we think through these important matters our attitude towards suffering and persecution will be brought more in line with Scripture. And, as a result, when we experience true persecution for Christ's sake, we will rejoice that we are found worthy to be identified with our great and glorious Lord who has gone before us and won the victory on our behalf.