



SWEET PERSECUTION

A 30-DAY DEVOTIONAL WITH INSPIRING STORIES
FROM THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

RON BRACKIN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *SON OF HAMAS*

“Only someone familiar with Scripture and the history of persecuted Christians would dare put the words sweet and persecution in the same phrase. Ron Brackin’s 30-day devotional is not for the faint of heart. Rather, it is for those of you who know that some of God’s best lessons are learned at the feet of those who have suffered for their faith.”

**Terry Madison, Former President/CEO
Open Doors USA**

“ ... a biblical perspective that brings some balance to our understanding of New Testament Christian living ... a study that every Christian needs to prayerfully contemplate. It could even change your life?”

**Paul Estabrooks
Author of *Night of a Million Miracles***

“Persecution is not the latest buzzword; it’s for real. It happens when either a political or religious system takes away our liberties of Christian witness. Can it ever be sweet? Only in the victorious lives of those

who choose to pay the price—beginning with Stephen.”

**Brother Andrew, Founder
Open Doors International**

“ ... brings into focus one of the great paradoxes of Scripture: one cannot live the Christian life without suffering hardship and persecution, yet it is through the hardship and persecution that comes the greatest joy and fulfillment. In this book, the stories of those who have suffered for their faith radiate that truth and provide a welcome invitation for each of us to embrace the full life to which God has called us.”

**Rick Dunham, Owner
Dunham + Company**

FOREWORD

Sweet persecution? It sounds like a contradiction in terms. No sensible Christian seeks persecution, and I can make that statement with full confidence, having met thousands of persecuted Christians around the globe during the last thirty years.

Persecution is painful. Persecution is traumatic. Persecution can be deadly. Persecution is also assured: “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” ¹

So where is the sweetness? In the fruit persecution produces.

Several years ago, I met with a pastor who had suffered threats, intimidations, and painful police interrogations for his Christian activities. I asked him, “How do you endure it all?” He paused, then replied, “If there were no battles, there would be no victories.” There was a sweetness in his response.

Jesus said in John 15:2 that “every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.” Pruning is cutting, but it produces more and sweeter fruit. Hebrews 12:11 says, “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet

to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

We have much to learn from those who suffer for their faith in Christ. So don't rush through these excellent reflections. Linger in the Scriptures. Listen to the voices of the persecuted. Taste the sweetness. Pray.

Then, go live out and share what you've learned in the power of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God and the encouragement of His Body.

Jeff Taylor

Chief Executive Office

Open Doors International

INTRODUCTION

The New Testament is the story of God's single greatest act of love. But it is also the account of his *second* greatest act of love.

The first was sending his only Son to pay the unimaginable price for our sins. The second was allowing his redeemed children—you and me—to suffer and die for the name of his Son.

Western Christianity today, however, has no theology of persecution. Ours is a theology of prosperity—a faith without risk and a salvation that does little more than snatch us away from the rim of Hell, pat us on the back, and send us on our way with our heavenly ticket punched.

The Bible, however, paints a radically different picture.

While believers in the West joyfully quote the litany of mighty heroes of the faith in the first thirty-four-and-a-half verses of Hebrews 11, the church throughout the rest of the world daily experiences the reality of the next four-and-a-half:

Others were tortured and refused to
be released, so that they might gain

a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Persecution is inevitable. It is just as much of what Watchman Nee calls “the normal Christian life” as prayer, worship, and fellowship.

We love to claim the blessings of Matthew 5:3-9 but preach little on verses 10-12:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all

kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Can I hear an amen, somebody?

We cannot embrace the blessings of being Christ's and spurn the persecution. The rule is: first the persecution, then the blessing:

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields —*and with them, persecutions*) and in the age to come, eternal life.” ²

Do we expect to get back a hundred times more than what we give up for Jesus? Of course we do. And we will. With persecutions.

Do we expect to enter the kingdom of God? Of course we do.

They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. ³

Do we want Jesus to be manifest in our lives? Certainly.

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given

over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. ⁴

Do we want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus? Absolutely.

Again Paul explains to his friends that they ...

... know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, *everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*” ⁵

All right, blessings follow persecution. But where does it say that persecution is inevitable?

“*When* you are persecuted ...” ⁶

“*When* trouble or persecution comes because of the word ...” ⁷

“Then you *will* be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you *will* be hated by all nations because of me.” ⁸

“‘*We must* go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,’ they said.” ⁹

“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will* be persecuted ...” ¹⁰

And Jesus says in Revelation 2:10,

“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

Finally, no one denies that Jesus himself was persecuted—beyond anything we can ever imagine or understand. And he says clearly in John 15:20, “Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

Persecution is inevitable in the life of every Christian, whether it takes the form of beatings, imprisonment, and martyrdom or, as is more common in the West, in the form of temptations.

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But *when you are tempted*, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” ¹¹

Seized you ... tempted beyond what you can bear ... a way out ... stand up under it. Doesn't this sound like persecution?

But recognizing that persecution is normal and unavoidable is just the first step.

In this thirty-day devotional, we will look at persecution from God's perspective. And we will read true stories of the modern-day faith and courage of our brothers and sisters around the world—many of whom are paying the highest price for following Jesus.

HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

Sweet Persecution is useful for personal study, prayer, and meditation, as well as for Sunday school, group Bible studies, or home groups. It is also an ideal thirty-day preparation for the annual International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, which occurs mid-November.

Each day begins with a selected Bible text, followed by a true story of faith in the face of persecution that will strengthen and encourage you, provide a touch point for your prayers, and remind you of the urgent needs of the church in countries that are hostile to the Gospel.

Following each story are *a few observations*. These are not meant to be a comprehensive teaching, but some thoughts to help stimulate meditation or discussion.

The *food for thought* section is just that. It is designed to give you a little more to chew on; to help you or your group apply to your own life the principles highlighted by the devotion.

And *for further study* offers Scriptures that expand on and reinforce what is presented each day.

Occasionally, *Sweet Persecution* also recommends other books or group activities suggested to help strengthen your understanding of and relationship to the persecuted church.

ABOUT THE TITLE



It is virtually impossible to grow roses without being pricked by thorns. Yet if I reject them because of a little blood, I deny myself the sweetness of their incomparable beauty and fragrance.

The apostle Paul teaches us to “walk in love, [esteeming and delighting in one another] as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a slain offering and sacrifice to God [for you, so that it became] a sweet fragrance.”¹²

Is persecution ever sweet?

Definitely not in the sense of the pain and loss suffered. But it is indeed sweet in a much deeper sense—the sense experienced by the apostles who, after being flogged, “left the Sanhedrin *rejoicing* because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”¹³

We too need to view persecution like Jesus, who “for the joy set before him ... endured the cross,

scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”¹⁴

We too have a cross to bear.

Then Jesus said to his disciples,
“Whoever wants to be my disciple
must deny themselves and take up
their cross and follow me.”¹⁵

And we have the same joy set before us.

Now if we are children, then we are
heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs
with Christ, if indeed we share in
his sufferings in order that we may
also share in his glory....¹⁶

And God raised us up with Christ
and seated us with him in the
heavenly realms in Christ Jesus ...

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My deepest desire and earnest prayer is that, after you read this little devotional, fear of any form of persecution will have no place in you. That

condemnation will find no foothold in your soul when you find yourself suffering for no apparent reason. That you will be bolder for Christ's sake than ever before, caring nothing for whatever you might suffer in consequence.

I hope you will add the men, women, and children of the persecuted church to your permanent prayer list. That they would be in your heart and on your lips not only one day of the year but every day. And that, as a result of your prayers and mine, our suffering brothers and sisters would feel in the midst of the persecution, "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" that they "may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." ¹⁸



DAY ONE

PERSECUTION BEGINS

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Dr. Paul Negrut pastored the largest Baptist church in Europe, located in Oradea, Romania. He served the church faithfully under the cruel Ceausescu regime and often suffered personal mistreatment.

One night, after a very successful evangelistic crusade, he returned home to find his wife weeping and his nine-year-old daughter trembling.

Through her tears, his wife explained that when their daughter was coming home from school, the Securitate (secret police) tried to rape her to destroy her and the family.

“That night I was in a great struggle,” Paul said. “For the first time I was thinking to emigrate from Romania. I asked the Lord, ‘Should I leave the blessing of suffering or should I endure to see my girl like that?’

“I talked to my wife, and we chose to stay.

“Two days later, they tried again to rape my daughter. And two days later they tried to rape my wife. But every time God was protecting them in a miraculous way.”¹⁹

a few observations

The persecution of the church began before it was even established. It started when Satan stirred up the fear, greed, and rage in the heart of a man named Herod and wielded him like a sword to pierce the heart of Jesus. If he could destroy this Messiah as

soon as he arrived, Satan thought, there would be no church, no cross, and no redemption. And Satan would win his war against God.

But Jesus was not alone on this earth. His Father was with him, watching over and protecting him. And God sent an angel to warn Joseph and Mary to escape. Satan tried many other times during Jesus' life to stop him from reaching the cross.

He used temptations, riotous Jews, proud religious leaders, and finally, when all seemed lost, Satan used the spirit of rejection that caused Jesus to cry out, “ ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ ”²⁰

There was, however, no persecution that could separate Jesus from the love of his Father. He did indeed accomplish his mission. And from that time to this, Satan has turned his hatred against the church—Christ's physical body on earth.

food for thought

Every Christian has a unique mission on earth. How has Satan used persecution to discourage you from accomplishing your mission? Persistent temptations? Life-threatening accidents? Choices that led you in

the opposite direction from the way God would have you go? Persecution by family members, your community, classmates, co-workers, government officials?

for further study

Jesus was not the only one the devil tried to kill in his youth. Satan used this strategy over and over throughout the Old Testament:

- Read Genesis 37 to see how Satan used Joseph's jealous brothers to try to destroy the child and prevent the birth of the nation of Israel in Egypt.
- Read Exodus 1 and 2 and watch Satan use Egypt's pharaoh to try to destroy the fledgling nation of Israel—and Israel's newborn deliverer, Moses.
- And in 1 Samuel 17 and 18, Satan used a bear, a lion, a giant Philistine warrior, and even a king of Israel to try to kill a boy named David and destroy the God-ordained lineage of Jesus.
- In the book of Esther, Satan uses wicked Haman to try to kill the beautiful young Esther and destroy the remnant of Israel.

- Read Daniel 3 to see how Satan used King Nebuchadnezzar to try to destroy the three Hebrew youths—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Then read Daniel 6 and watch the jealous satraps and administrators of King Darius persecute young Daniel.