

**THE
CHRISTIAN
AND
PERSECUTION**

Pastoring and Ministering under Persecution

MODULE 8



Lesson Eight

Pastoring and Ministering under Persecution

Learning Objective:

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to recognise and reflect on the spiritual and emotional challenges faced under persecution, to develop strategies for remaining strong, and to understand how imperative is nurturing trust and maintaining unity in a community under pressure.

Preparatory Bible Reading: Romans 5:1-5; Romans 8; Romans 12; 1 Timothy 4-6.

Lesson Outline:

Introduction

1. Spiritual and Emotional Challenges

- a. Fear
- b. Shame
- c. Identity

2. Challenges Faced by Ministers

- a. Intense Pressure
- b. Islamic Influence
- c. Spiritual Warfare
- d. Biblical and Practical Solutions

3. Helping the Persecuted

- a. Encouraging True Believers
- b. Biblical Teachings
- c. Love Resists the Devil

Conclusion

Learning Activity

Additional Reading

Lesson Eight Test

Bibliography

Lesson Eight

Pastoring and Ministering under Persecution

Christians are called to remain faithful even under persecution

Introduction

Believers and especially leaders in the Middle East and North Africa often face persecution because of their position while at the same time needing to nurture and lead others who are persecuted. In this lesson we will address four basic topics of how to minister under (while in) persecution. These topics are:

1. The spiritual and psychological challenges faced by Christians under persecution
2. Common challenges faced by those who minister
3. The importance of nurturing trust and maintaining unity
4. How can we help other persecuted believers practically

Physical and material challenges are often most visible, but it is essential to recognize the spiritual, psychological and emotional challenges faced by those undergoing persecution, and to nurture and care with these needs in mind. Even more, those of us who are in leadership often face more intense pressures than those we minister to; the leader needs strategies for remaining strong.

The church is better equipped to stand strong in the face of persecution if it is a united body, characterized by mutual trust and support. What are the things that build up a body of believers and bring unity? We will explore this topic.

It is possible to endure persecution; it is possible to live and if called to do so, to die for the sake of the name of Christ. We will consider some of the practical steps that can be taken by leaders and the body of Christ living with persecution so that we can remain true to the Lord, thereby bringing glory and honour to Him.

1. Spiritual and Emotional Challenges

Christians in the MENA region experience spiritual and emotional challenges as forms of persecution

A. Fear

The first challenge we will address is the spiritual issue of fear. As believers we can fear many things and when persecuted it is reasonable to be fearful, or so we believe. In fact, most of us have experienced a certain level of fear because of persecution.

There are many things that produce fear in our lives. When we come to Christ, we may lose our families, our livelihood, our Ummah, our homes, our identity, as well as the possibility of finding a marriage partner. The newfound freedom in Christ and being liberated from the bondage of oppressive beliefs and cultural traditions does not

automatically remove fear from our lives. To the contrary, the amount of fear and anxiety might intensify. There is now perhaps the fear of rejection, persecution, of being discovered, etc. Fragile and unstable circumstances and environment can cause fear to become a powerful and a crippling force that causes many of us to remain secret believers. It has hindered the majority of Christians in evangelising those of us from a Muslim background or become a home to others who are in Christ.

B. Shame

Haitham felt ashamed of himself for shaming his family.¹ He did not give up his faith in Christ, but was overwhelmed with sadness for hurting his divorced mother. His mother's words nag him: "How can you do this to me? I have carried you for nine months. I have sacrificed this and that for your sake etc." When visiting her, she kept after him to go to the mosque and to fast so others would see him practicing Islam. She knew Haitham would not forsake his faith in Christ but she wanted him to outwardly act as a Muslim. She believed her honour would be restored. She is a woman who had honour and her son has taken that honour away from her. Haitham outwardly following Islamic rituals would restore her honour! Those of us who still have strong connections with our families are expected to act as Muslims when with our families, especially when visiting our family homes. This is a difficult issue especially when young children are involved.

Haitham, though he has become a Christian and has relocated to the West, still has a strong sense of shame that goes beyond feeling guilty. It is interesting that Psalm 38:4 says, "My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear". Some of us are overwhelmed with the feeling of shame as a result of the emotional manipulation of our loved ones, especially by the cries of a mother or the yelling of a father. This shame creates a mental and emotional struggle. Doubting one's faith is not uncommon under emotional and psychological abuse. A minister and pastor cannot afford to ignore these emotions.

Our MENA cultures can be referred to as shame-based cultures rather than guilt-based like in Western cultures. Guilt is defined by the fact of breaking a law while shame is the feelings we have because of the guilt of breaking a law, whether a written or cultural one. Someone who comes from a different culture might understand the term shame in a different way than the way someone from the MENA region understands it. This may lead to underestimating the danger we face when our actions and belief brings shame to our family. Shaming (causing loss of face) a person or a family can be a matter of life and death and could result in either murder or suicide. It is serious! One cannot understand the concept of honour killing without understanding the concept of shame in the MENA region.

Guilt-based cultures focus on the person who is convicted of a certain crime or who acted in an unacceptable manner, who then has to pay the price of his crime and correct whatever wrong he has committed. The feeling of guilt or shame might or might not accompany the guilty person. A guilty person needs to make amends and maybe has to reform his ways. In guilt-based cultures, guilt rather than shame is used to effect behavioural change. Death is rarely the consequence of guilt in the West while it does happen in the MENA, for example, honour killings. But the question remains: why?

¹Interview with Haitham

As part of this culture, we know that shame is closely connected with reputation. The honour of our family is of utmost importance and is therefore protected at all cost, even death. It is important to appear honourable even though we know what happens in secret is often quite different. “A man’s security, health, prosperity, and religious standing all traditionally depended on his relatives.”² “Honour and shame, for an Arab family/tribe is seen as a key survival factor. Dishonour brings physical danger to the family.”³

Loyalty to family and whole group is more important than the individual in the eyes of our culture. As we are family oriented cultures, conversion to Christ and leaving previous faith brings shame to the family and though you mean no harm to your family, only wanting them to experience the freedom you have in Christ, they are responding in a culturally appropriate way when they try to bring you back to the family.

Perhaps you have experienced the attempts of your family to make you change your mind. One truth in the Word of God that helps us when we experience persecution and are shamed by our family and society is our identity in Christ.

C. Identity

The issue of shame relates to identity as well, to the person’s place among his family and his society. Persecution will lead us to question ourselves about our true identities: Who am I truly? Am I really Christian? What if I keep my belief secret? Would it not be better and safer?

We as human beings long to be accepted to where we belong but the pressure that our societies exercise on us creates insecurities and uncertainties. It is sometimes more than a shame thing, but a belonging issue.

Two children were playing in a neighbourhood in one of the countries in the MENA region while their parents were having a Bible study. Other kids asked the two boys whether they were Muslims or Christians. One child answered that he was a Muslim because his parents told him not to say that he was Christian. The other child said he was Christian because his parents told him that he should say he is Christian. This is one example where identity is another sensitive area with which we struggle.

Identity issues because of the nature of Islam and our understanding of our position in Christ need to be understood as we minister to our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we come to faith from a Muslim background we start to learn about the body of Christ, being one in Him, and what it means to be a child of God. As we minister to others who are in Christ, we need to be sensitive to where they are in this process of learning about their new identity. The community around us of Christian background might find it hard accept us as brothers and sisters in the same family. So depending on the experiences of those we minister to, we will have to speak the truth as to our position in Christ, our heavenly calling and life as pilgrims here on earth.

² <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/220002/marriage-and-terror-war-part-ii/stanley-kurtz>

³ <http://libertyandculture.blogspot.de/2007/02/arab-honor-and-shame.html>

As we are aware, our children are considered Muslims under the law. Those among us with young children are struggling with the necessity of putting our children in school where they are taught Islam. I know of a brother that wept as he helped his seven-year-old son memorize verses from the Quran. We as parents might not be of one mind as to the education of our children. Some of us want them to stay in Muslim schools and feel we can influence their children at home while others of us do not want our children to be influenced by Islam. There are often no other options for the schooling of our children. And here is another battle we are facing. It is our role and our responsibility as stewards of God to raise our kids on loving the Lord and not being influenced by the majority culture and at the same time being part of society. It is complicated and needs divine wisdom.

We can find comfort in the words of Mark the evangelist, when our natural family members undermine what we believe and try to influence our children. “Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30). Also we must help and support our brothers and sisters whose children are taken away from them by their relatives.

Some of our families resign themselves to the fact that there is an infidel in the family. On the other hand, others pressure us not to display our newfound faith by wanting us to go to the mosque, fast, and observe other Islamic practices. The month of Ramadan is particularly challenging time of year for new believers in Christ.

Sometimes a believer is put in a public position, sharing his or her testimony early in their life as believers in Christ. This can result in more persecution or danger, restricting the opportunity to grow in maturity in the faith. Sometimes this exposure can lead to becoming arrogant and proud, not wanting accountability or allowing others to speak into our lives. Sometimes we can be manipulated by an outside organisation, become used as a tool for attracting much-needed organisational financial support. It can happen that a believer in Christ renounces his/her faith, backslides and becomes depressed.

Because of the degree to which a believer in Christ experiences loss and persecution, there is the need to allow for the necessary grieving. While grieving, it happens that a person is not always able to think clearly and solve problems, often lacking the energy to take the necessary steps that will help them.

We have looked briefly at some of the issues believers in the MENA deal with such as: fear, shame, identity, as well as grief. In the next section we will look at some other challenges the church in the MENA faces.

Review and Discussion Questions

- a. In your experience, what fears have you encountered most frequently among believers? What have you found helpful in dealing with these fears?

- b. How would you explain the difference between guilt and shame in the MENA, the West and the scripture? To what degree does shame and honor of the family affect those you work amongst?

2. Challenges Faced by Ministers

Love and unity are key factors in dealing with the challenges ministers face

A. Intense Pressure

As stated earlier, those of us who minister to others in the MENA in the role of a leader or pastor, often feel more intense pressure because of their position. We may be targeted and persecuted by the authorities and society to a greater degree. As we minister we must be sure of our calling to serve the Lord by serving in the church. Our calling is to build up the believers in the body of Christ, the universal Church, while we ourselves are facing persecution in order to bring glory to God, as we worship Him in Spirit and truth (John 4: 23).

We have all heard or experienced what crimes some groups and relatives commit against those who are in Christ and those who are associated with us. Churches in countries like Egypt and Iraq have been attacked and burned. It is easier for some authorities, according to their thinking, to sacrifice the human rights of an individual for the sake of stability in the country.

Lack of trust we have of others and believers in general can be due to trauma and the rejection we experience from our society and family. Understanding the principles of trauma counselling can be a great help to the many who have experienced it. And due to persecution, many of us think of relocating to the West as kind of relief. But is this the solution we are seeking to get out of our situation? Is it what we are called for?

We, as persecuted believers, must seek the internal peace and the assurance from God of what we are being called for and work accordingly. Otherwise, we will not find success and prosperity in all what we do. God, our heavenly father, knows better and is always preparing the best for us.

B. Islamic Influence

Often the lack of a community of faith, a biblical “Ummah”, means there are challenges in being a believer in the MENA and getting involved in the ministry there. Without taking into consideration the concept of Ummah, the leader could render himself useless when trying to help others grow in their journey with Christ. Sometimes, he or she will become like Job’s counsellors who speak biblical words, but unwisely apply them.

Those who are secret believers often do not have access to mature believers. There can be mistrust of each other and the likelihood that a foreign worker is seen as more trustworthy than one of us. But dependence on a foreign worker does not build the body of Christ in a particular location.

A significant point that needs to be understood is the use of terms in Islam and the Bible. It can take a considerable amount of time before some of us who are coming from a Muslim background uses biblical terms in their conversation and their prayers. As a general rule, many of us continue using Islamic terms when speaking about their journey or even when praying (especially in the beginning of our faith journey). Although we have been raised in a Islamic families and societies, we have to put some effort in understanding the terms. This is the responsibility of each believer in Christ as well as the leaders.

Therefore we need to understand Islamic definitions of theological terms such as heaven, sin, salvation...etc. We must ask many questions and not assume that all understand basic, biblical terminology. The same word can mean something quite different in Islam. The concept of heaven is very different in Islam. The biblical concept of love is absent in the Quran, for example. God is not the same as Allah when we examine and compare the Bible and the Quran.

Someone who still fears and believes Islamic teaching will need to be told and taught the truth which will help to set him free from his fear and crippling attitudes. The truth will enable him to walk in newness of life. The pastor himself will serve the Lord well if he remains faithful, available and teachable his whole life. He must be student of the word of God, always growing in his knowledge of the word. He should read it regularly and encourage others to do so too, not only leaders and pastors but all the body of Christ.

C. Spiritual Warfare

The personal integrity for those who are ministering in the MENA cannot be overemphasized. They may themselves be persecuted as they minister to others in similar situations. Therefore, a biblical character, a strong prayer life dependent on the Lord and a good understanding of the Word of God are of primary importance. A healthy family life and humility will do much to make a pastor an effective servant of the Lord.

So the pastor will need to examine his own beliefs and attempt to line them up with scripture. The person, who cares for their own family well, will be able to minister to others. "He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well" (1 Timothy 3:4-5, 12).

And when it comes to spiritual warfare, a sound understanding of the unseen world according to scripture will make it possible to be strong as a leader and convince the church of the need for doing battle spiritually. The influence of Islamic teaching and culture will be strong in this area so a boldness to preach the truth about freedom in Christ will help many be free from bondage to the past and the errors they have been taught all their lives (Ephesians 6: 10-18, 2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

It will be useful for servants of God to understand about forgiveness and practice it when they deal with others who have been abused or hurt in the past. A minister should know how to deal with demonic oppression by taking authority as a believer.

Burnout is a danger for those ministering to others. The need of understanding the need to take some vacation, to take the time to sharpen the saw will help those serving the Lord to be able to do so steadfastly in a challenging part of the God's vineyard. Taking days off, taking time to grow in the word, silence, solitude, and such are all spiritual disciplines that will enable a pastor to minister effectively. So why do we stretch ourselves in ministry to a point where we get exhausted?! This will have serious feedback on our families and ministries.

Another challenge faced is that established religions of majority people tend to indulge in pride. A servant of God must be humble and be able to teach about it to help others to overcome this huge barrier to living an abundant life in Christ, as they become aware of it in their own lives and the lives of others.

D. Biblical and Practical Solutions

It is important for us to have a community that nurtures and is unified. The church can become the spiritual Ummah for believers. How the church does church, where and how it meets will be different depending on the country and measure of persecution experienced. The Bible gives examples of how the early church met, so we do not need a building to be a church. Church buildings are good and if possible, can be built, but are not necessary. Meeting together, as Acts 2:42 records, was for teaching the apostles doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. This is a basic description of what happens in a church.

How these functions are carried out is different in different settings. The church as a body meeting together in a given locality can determine a biblical pattern that suits their situation by searching the scriptures diligently together. So do not hesitate to join a group of believers where you can grow and nurture. And if you are a secret believer, I encourage you to have trust in the Lord and he will lead you to other believers with the same situation.

Holy churches do not tolerate sin and have a good understanding of how to deal with that sin should sin become manifest in the church, will be strong and endure. The scripture says: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Each member is to seek to be holy as He is holy thereby bringing glory and honour to God. "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:14-16), "...So that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27).

Teaching on how to deal with individual sin and harmful habits will help others be holy and strong in the Lord. From our background, we have a tendency to do things to appear holy or spiritual. Therefore, we need biblical teaching on becoming holy according to God. Holiness has to do with our attitudes as well as our deeds.

Even in underground churches, informants might be present. The church will be able to be strong despite this threat but the church can learn how to discern real believers.

Prayer, dependence on the Holy Spirit and the word of God will there enable the church to grow in a hostile environment and even to thrive.

One area that will help with problems that arise is a biblical understanding of how to deal with offences, of others and those who are in leadership commit. Be an example of the believers in fulfilling the principles in Matthew 18: 15-22. In a culture that is shame-based, where saving face is very important, and the biblical teaching found in this passage is very needed. Again, understanding what forgiveness is and how it differs with reconciliation will be needed.

Also helpful is to seek resources, guidelines and practices that will help many of us who are persecuted living in risk of being arrested and questioned by local authorities. Networks can be set up and teaching done, so these events have less of a negative effect on the believers and the church in our area.

We have looked at some challenges believers in the MENA face to help ourselves and others. In the next chapter we will suggest some specific ways we can help more effectively.

Review and Discussion Questions

- a. In what areas in your own life have you struggled because of the Islamic teaching you were taught or have encountered? And how would you help someone deal with the residual influence of Islamic teachings?
- b. Please list what are some of the causes of grief and loss in the life of a believer. Describe your personal experience of dealing with grief yourself and with others. Explain how you experienced it or recognised it in others.
- c. List five of the challenges of ministering in the MENA.
- d. Do you agree with the author that the biblical God is not the same as Allah in Islam? Explain.

3. Helping the Persecuted

Christians are called to help the persecuted, thus bringing glory to God

How we can help those we work amongst can be obvious for some issues. Others will become evident as we gain experience. We will cover various areas below and you might know of areas we have not covered in this chapter.

A. Encouraging True Believers

The three basic responses to persecution are flight, fight or fortitude. The main response from examples we see in the Bible is that of fortitude. Many are not able to flee or have the resources or ability to fight unfair treatment and persecution. But there is much we can do to help those who have to show endurance and persevere. We are called to persevere, even have joy, when persecuted.

Believers who endure persecution have the following characteristics in common, according to a detailed study conducted by Nik Ripken. This list helps us know where to concentrate our efforts when making disciples and encouraging others to be able to be strong when trials come.

It was found that believers usually do not renounce their faith in Jesus Christ when persecuted if the following is part of their lives: 1. A real faith in Christ Jesus as their Saviour, 2. A healthy prayer life, 3. Have memorized scripture, 4. Know they are being prayed for and their families are being cared for, 5. Know Christians songs in their heart language, 6. Know they are suffering for their faith and 7. Have heritage of suffering or have seen others endure persecution. These characteristics will be studied further in Module 10 of this course.

In regard to the first characteristic listed, the first thing we do is attempt to discern if a person is truly a brother or sister in Christ. The process of coming to believe in Christ can be a long and gradual one. Realizing this, the pastor and leader will be able to help when he asks a person about their journey of faith. The report of other trusted believers can be of great value. “Do not be hasty in laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep thyself pure” (1 Timothy 5:22).

As mentioned above, we should find out what someone’s understanding is of who God is, salvation, love, truth and heaven, to name a few. Ask many questions to determine how much the believer you are ministering to understands about the basic tenets of the Bible, biblical concepts and terms. We ourselves need to deeply understand biblical terms as well as Islamic definitions of these theological terms.

A healthy prayer life can be encouraged, by teaching and example. The better our prayer life is, the more discernment and guidance we will have in our ministry. There is much written on the subject. It is best to search the Scriptures and teach on this subject using the examples found in God’s word. Because of the preference of oral communication over written in the Middle East in general, oral teaching is often the best way, especially at the beginning. Audio and Internet resources abound also. A praying church, that meets for prayer, composed of members strong in prayer and dependence on God, will be able to stand strong in the heavy storms of life and the different forms of persecution they are facing.

A healthy community of believers can give all its members the encouragement and help when they need it so we strive to build this community, not matter the size. As we serve, the size of our group is not as important as our faithfulness to God. He knows what to entrust us with as we serve Him.

Where there is great difficulty in meeting together, groups might need to be small and very creative in how they meet. Also there is much available in way of media through satellite TV and the Internet. Songs can be a great encouragement, as well as teaching that are available on the web.

Speaking of the media, pornography is a great temptation when using the Internet, and more so for men. Find someone who will keep you accountable in this area and never assume that you are immune of this sinful pattern in your life. Finding someone to keep

you accountable in others areas of your life is also a wise decision. If you do not have someone like this in your life, pray for someone who will help you in this area.

Teaching on the Holy Spirit and His power working in us gives us hope. We know 2 Peter 1:3 says, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.” So there is hope. We can be more than conquerors (Romans 8: 37-39).

Identity in Christ should be taught and balanced with who God is, “But the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits” (Daniel 11:32). We will not be bold for a God we do not know personally. He is holy, strong and loving. His children should resemble their heavenly Father.

Another area that is very helpful as you lead is to be conversant in spiritual warfare. A sound understanding of the unseen world according to scripture will make it possible to be strong as a leader and convince the church of the need for doing battle spiritually. The influence of Islamic teaching and culture will be strong in this area so a boldness to preach the truth about freedom in Christ will help many find freedom from bondage to the past and the errors they have been taught all their lives. Ephesians 6: 10-18, 2 Corinthians 10:3-6,

We would do well to carefully examine our beliefs about women because of the Islamic context we are in. We must make an effort to see women as God does, equally valuable in God's eyes. There will be needs in the congregation among women that would be best met by other women. As a leader and one who is to build up the saints and encourage them to love and good works, we can encourage women to fulfil their roles as members of the body of Christ and to exercise their spiritual gifts.

It is wise and recommended to follow the policy of never be alone with a member of the opposite sex when we are ministering to others. A wise leader and minister will put into practice safeguards so there no appearance of evil to others, whether among the believers or unbelievers. For example, if a brother is speaking to a sister, they could speak together where others are present and can see them, even if their conversation is private. If married, the wife or husband can be nearby, and also aware of the appointment. Keep things open and transparent and there will be no need to be ashamed. The Lord will guide in provided creative solutions to our limitations. He is the God of the impossible.

When possible, we need to make it possible for single believers to meet in a safe environment. This is a new idea but has been practiced with much care. There is the risk that those who are not believers might want to be involved so care must be taken. Muslim parents might persecute a daughter who goes to such a conference because she would be bringing dishonour to the family.

Teaching about the Christian family will be a great help for families as they put off old ways and habits and learn new ones. You can be a great encouragement and role model in this when you show in your own family what a godly husband or wife or child does to care for other family members, Ephesians 5 and 6:1-4, and Colossians 3:18-25. The world in which our children grow up can be hostile to their faith in Christ but this has been an issue since the church began.

Children all over the world are immersed in the worldly system that is against God and that attempts to make them conform to the world. Romans 12:1-2 says to us “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” A fundamental truth of which all parents must be mindful of is that God is sovereign and powerful and loves the little children more than we as parents love them. Neither Islam nor the Quran is stronger than the one who is in us. (1 John 4:4) This is only a stage each family goes through.

We might be unfamiliar with what a biblical home looks like if we have been raised in a Muslim home under the influence of the Quran, Hadith and Islamic culture. The Islamic understanding of relationships between men and women and the role of women is unbiblical and damaging to biblically based healthy relationships. This is a difficult subject. There is a need to teach biblical principles and not Arabic Christian or Western cultural patterns. Some may have been influenced by Western cultures and this can be counterproductive. Biblical principles concerning marriage and the family need to be unpacked, taking into account our cultural heritage and our environment.

I suggested to a brother from the MENA that he wash dishes to express his love for his wife. His wife reacted by saying, “I did not marry a woman. I married a man.” I asked a pastor's wife for her opinion about something. She said, “Whatever my husband says is my opinion”. This is not necessarily representative of all of us but it is, however, exemplary of how women in our culture are influenced by Islamic culture think and act. Biblical principles need to be taught, and practical application of these principles needs to be consistently applied without having to go against the culture. God's Word can intrude on culture, when cultural practices are wrong.

The theology of suffering needs to be understood by us as leaders and of those we lead so we come to accept and understand that suffering is a part of the Christian life. Lesson 3 deals with this topic.

Having a heritage of suffering means that we know others, sometimes older but not necessarily, who have endured persecution and maybe even have died for their faith. Boldness despite threats is seen in the example of Peter and John when they had been released from prison and went to their friends and prayed for boldness to speak further (Acts 4: 29-30). Many times those in leadership and pastors are able to be an example to their flocks in how to act when persecuted.

B. Love Resists the Devil

Fear can be addressed by teaching the necessity of resisting the devil, as fear is one of his tactics. Truth sets us free from fear and sinful practices that often increase fear. Knowing who God is, his acts and ways, lead us to trust Him more, even while in difficult circumstances. “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). A bold leader shows others a good example and encourages them to be strong too.

Since the beginning of the church, believers need to accept the fact that there are not answers to all of our “whys”. We get some answers but the secret things belong to the Lord, and we are responsible for the truth we know. He tells us certain things and equips us to obey Him. When we do not know the future then we are given the opportunity to exercise faith and increase our trust in Him, believing that all things work together for good. Our responsibility here is to love and obey God. Focusing on God and on our identity in Christ will help us.

We need to know the source of our fear and can be helped when we have the freedom to speak about them. It is important for the pastor and leader to acknowledge his own fear so others will feel comfortable to share their fears. There is no need for us to hide our fear and pretend that we trust Christ and are willing to face persecution for His sake.

There is time to speak of the fears and there is time to let go and trust God in the midst of fear. “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you” (Psalm 56:3). Talking too much about our fears can be harmful. Also, the principle of putting off fear and putting on trust applies. “But that is not the way you learned Christ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:20-23).

Ultimately, the only solution to dealing with fear is love, that is God's love. “By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the Day of Judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (1 John 4:17-18). Therefore, the pastor needs to direct the attention of others to God, trust in Him so he and they can experience God's love.

The Bible says many times “Fear not” and “Do not fear” as well as “Fear the Lord”. We are told whom to fear and what not to fear. The truth of God's word is, “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7).

There is a delicate balance when teaching principles and the application of principles. We all need to submit to the truth that the Bible transcends all cultures because Western and Arabic Christian cultures are not the measuring stick by which we should live. Teaching on what it means to have love, power and a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).

But there is hope as we look in the scriptures and see the example of the church in Acts, expanding and growing, bringing to glory to God by their faithfulness to Him and His word. May the church in the MENA be a blessing to the church as a whole as they prove by their perseverance in persecution that God deserves all the honour and glory.

Review and Discussion Questions

- a. What are the seven characteristics of those who have endured persecution, according to Nik Ripken?
- b. What in your life has helped you stand strong in persecution?

- c. What passages of scripture would you use to teach about the Christian family in your church or house group? How else can Christian family life be learned?
- d. What are some ways that the needs of women can be better met?

Conclusion

In this lesson, we have covered some issues believers in Christ from the MENA struggle with such as fear, shame and identity. Also we have looked into some of the challenges that we face to help ourselves and others remain true to the Lord when we are living under persecution. We have learned that as leaders and pastors in MENA we should lead by example spreading the love of Jesus, maintaining unity and nurturing trust, thus drawing others closer to the Lord. Our calling is to build up the believers in the body of Christ, bringing glory and honour to God.

Christians, especially in our shame-based cultures face persecution on different levels that goes from spiritual and emotional persecution to reach sometimes physical persecution. Therefore, we need to have a strong prayer life dependent on the Lord and the Holy Spirit, as well as a good understanding of the Word of God. We should always remind ourselves that our hope is in Christ alone. He was the first to be persecuted and still loved and forgave. Finally, let us recall the words of Matthew, “And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life” (Matthew 19: 29).

Learning Activity

Detention by Local Authorities

As believers in Christ, we can face at some point in our lives various levels of persecution. But when it comes to being arrested by the local authorities of one's country, then it is a different story!

Take some time to interview someone you know who actually experienced such a detention, and how he/she dealt with the situation? What kind of temptations he/she underwent? Was it pressure to renounce the faith and be set free, in order to regain respect of family and society? Or, was it bitterness and hate towards others? What impact had the experience on self-image, identity, and shame? What strategy proved helpful to deal with the situation?

Write a summary of your interview with your reflections on this case.

Additional Reading

Willard, Dallas, *The Great Omission*, San Francisco: Harper, 2006. Chapter 11: "Personal Soul Care For Ministers... And Others."

Lesson Eight Test

Choose the best answer

- 1- For the church to remain strong, it must:
 - a- Remain united as body of Christ
 - b- Nurture trust among the body of Christ
 - c- Remains faithful and lead by example
 - d- All of the above

- 2- Christians facing persecution should, under all conditions:
 - a- Remain faithful
 - b- Relocate to the West
 - c- Become secret believers
 - d- Deny their faith
 - e- None of the above

- 3- Under emotional and psychological abuse, a Christian starts questioning his:
 - a- Faith
 - b- Identity
 - c- Belonging
 - d- All of the above

- 4- In our cultures, shame is related to:
 - a- Guilt
 - b- Reputation
 - c- Position in society
 - d- All of the above

- 5- As believers from a Islamic background, we should:
 - a- Isolate our kids from Islamic society
 - b- Let them engage with society
 - c- Keep a healthy Christian environment at home
 - d- None of the above
 - e- b and c

Answer true or false

- 6- Christians from a Muslim background should remain secret believers if they are going to live under persecution.
- 7- Christians from a Muslim background will face at some point in their lives issues related to their real identities and their belonging.

Answer the following questions

- 8- As a Christian living in persecution, what are the fears you are facing now and how do you think you can overcome them?
- 9- What is the role your church is playing in helping believers overcome the feeling of shame?
- 10- In a short paragraph, share your personal experience with persecution. What are your real struggles? And what are your strategies in overcoming such persecution?

- 11- Explain how shame can affect our identity as Christian believers from in Islamic cultures.
- 12- Dallas Willard describes “practicing the presence of God” as “the fundamental secret for caring for our souls.” What does he mean by this, and how can practice the presence of God in our day to day lives?
- 13- Living under persecution is really difficult and might threaten our lives. So it might be better if we think of relocating to the West where there is more freedom and where life is easier. But, on the other hand, we are probably missing God’s call on our lives. Give your opinion on this, and explain briefly.

Bibliography

Ripken, Nik, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected*, B&H Publishing Group, 2013.

Willard, Dallas, *The Great Omission*, San Francisco: Harper, 2006.

