A biblical theology of persecution and discipleship: Part 1. The Pentateuch

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Abstract

Contrary to popular opinion, biblical teaching on religious freedom and the persecution of the righteous is not restricted to the New Testament. Significant foundational teachings are found in the Pentateuch on religious freedom, beginning with the creation of mankind in the divine image, and persecution, beginning with the Fall and the first murder, that of Abel by Cain. These foundational teachings are exemplified in the Pentateuch in the lives of its major characters including Noah, Lot, Abraham, Isaac, and Moses as they seek to live out lives of faith in the face of opposition.

Keywords Persecution, theology, Bible, Pentateuch, image of God, faith, human rights, Abel, Cain, Noah, Lot, Abraham, Isaac, Moses

Not surprisingly, the Pentateuch lays the foundation for a biblical theology of persecution and discipleship. Without an understanding of this foundation, our understanding of the biblical teaching on the subject will focus exclusively (or almost so) on New Testament passages – a common practice among those who teach on this subject or who work in the field of promoting religious liberty.[1]

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[1] I recall a discussion with a well-known leader of a ministry devoted to serving the persecuted church who exclaimed, when learning of my research, "But there is no teaching on persecution in the Old Testament"!

The biblical basis for human rights and religious liberty

The Christian view of human rights and religious liberty is largely based not on a set of specific biblical proof texts, but on a biblical view of mankind. The Bible uniquely describes humans as being created in the image of God (Gen 1:26,27). This has profound implications for how Christians view human rights.

1. God as giver and guardian of rights

Being made in the image of God, man is by his very nature responsible to God to obey Him and to be in relationship with Him. God, in turn, chooses to act on man's behalf and to be in relationship with mankind. His character provides the foundation for laws and values that allow man, the bearer of the divine image, to have freedom without chaos.

Such freedom is not found simply by obeying divine commands.[2] The place to begin is not with the assertion that "this is what the Bible says and therefore we must obey." We must, of course, be careful to take seriously God's revelation in the Scriptures. But God's revelation is first and foremost a revelation of Himself. The basis of all biblical commands is the character of God, whose character we are to reflect as image-bearers. God expects us to act toward others as He acts toward us.

Even a cursory examination of the scriptural record reveals a God who is particularly concerned with the minimal civil rights of people belonging to vulnerable groups. The Mosaic Law, for example, surpassed other contemporary civil codes in its affirmation of fair and equitable treatment of all citizens regardless of their social status. The right to life and to be unharmed, is intrinsic to each human life, since we are created in a body of flesh and blood. Protection from being denied the necessities of life, theft of personal property, physical abuse, abortion, and being taken hostage all find biblical support as requirements of God's justice for those created in His image.

A Christian view of human rights, therefore, locates these rights within a framework where God is both the giver of responsibility and the guardian of rights. Humans have rights because God cares for

[2] This concept is in contrast to Islam and its imposition of Sharia law.

them, protects them, and demands justice for them. In that sense, He gives us rights and guards them.

2. The right to be respected

As a bearer of the image of God, though marred by sin, individuals are worthy of respect and possessors of dignity. To disrespect the image bearer is to disrespect the one whose image is being represented (Jas 3:9). This is foundational to a biblical worldview and a Christian view of human rights. In looking for the basis for the rights of humans we should not, as Paul Marshall notes, look for a self-contained, inherent dignity or for the presence of a supposed defining human characteristic such as will, reason, or conscience. Instead we should look first to our status as God's creatures.[3]

In contrast neither Islam nor communism acknowledges that man is created in the image of God.[4] For this reason, they do not have a basis for determining why human beings have rights to freedom of belief and have therefore been consistently unable or unwilling to protect these rights. Freedoms, under such systems, become those rights that are given to individuals or groups rather than rights that are acknowledged as being intrinsic to humanity. Rights, in the Christian perspective, are not given by any human institution but are acknowledged and upheld as being granted by God.

3. The right to be wrong

In Exodus 22:21, we find the Lord commanding Israel not to oppress the foreigner. It is significant that this admonition immediately follows the Lord's instructions to execute those who worship other gods. At first glance, this may appear contradictory. What is apparent, however, is that while the Israelites were not to worship foreign deities, they were not to oppress the foreigner himself. This implies permission for

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[3] Paul Marshall, "Dooyeweerd's Empirical Theory of Rights." *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd.* ed. C. T. McIntire. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985:119–142.

[4] Indeed, communism, being atheistic in orientation, actually denies it. Regarding Islam's teaching, see Christine Schirrmacher, *The Islamic View of the Major Christian Teachings.* Hamburg: RVB, 2001:27,28; Bruce A. McDowell and Anees Zaka, *Muslims and Christians at the Table.* Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1999:125,126; Don Richardson, *Secrets of the Koran.* Ventura: Regal, 2003:141–143. In Surah 4:28, man is described as being created "weak."

the foreigner to continue his religious practice in Israel. Only when the foreigner's religious practice involved such heinous customs as child sacrifice was this religious liberty to be restricted (Lev 20:2). God's people were to keep themselves separate from false religious systems of their day, yet without violating the rights of those whom they knew to be wrong.[5]

As Marshall points out, Israel was never instructed to conduct a crusade or holy war against foreign nations beyond their borders. Later commands to root out idolatry were directed against the practices of Israel itself. Other nations were free to order their religious life, even though their beliefs and practices were specifically and categorically branded as false.[6] Still we must remember that Israel was expected to be a blessing for all nations and a testimony to the truth of God.

Exemplified by the Creator's willingness to allow false religious beliefs to continue unpunished for the present, Christians uphold the right for the individual or group to be wrong. Therein lies the difference between evangelism and proselytism.[7] Religious coercion is a violation of an individual's God-given right to choose one's own belief system. Even if a religious practice is deemed incorrect, morally repugnant, and inconsistent with the general and special revelation of God, so long as it does not violate the rights of others, it should be not interfered with.

This does not negate the importance of apologetics and evangelism. As God's image bearers, we are His messengers, seeking to restore individuals to a right relationship with their Creator. Yet, reflecting God's image, we do so through persuasion, not compulsion. Being created in the image of God calls us to use methods that respect the rights of others to be wrong, if they persist in upholding their beliefs.

Countries that have historically been influenced by a strong Christian worldview (and Protestantism in particular) have been demonstrated to maintain the highest levels of religious liberty for

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5 Paul Marshall, *A Christian Defense of Religious Liberty.* A position paper for Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, 1996:1,2. - http://tinyurl.com/634wqn

6 Ibid.: 2.

7 See Penner 2004:102-104 for further discussion of the difference between evangelism and proselytism in the light of the doctrine of the Trinity.

their citizens. Of course, such freedoms have not always been consistently upheld. The brutal persecution of Anabaptists during the Reformation is only one tragic example of how Christians have failed to consistently practice a biblical view of religious liberty. Evangelicals continue to be persecuted in parts of Latin America in the name of Roman Catholicism, just as they do in Ethiopia in the name of Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Recent developments in western Europe should cause Christians great concern, as countries such as Belgium, Austria, Germany, and France have passed legislation restricting the activities and existence of new, non-orthodox religions or "sects." In their antipathy to and ignorance of these new faiths, many in these societies tend to pigeonhole evangelical minorities together with groups that are genuinely dangerous. In eastern Europe, governments are increasingly restricting the activities and existence of religious groups that may potentially challenge the hegemony of the historically dominant one. It must be asserted, however, that such actions are not the fruit of a truly biblical view of human rights but violations of it. Christianity must not be judged by the actions of its inconsistent followers but by the actions, teachings, and revealed character of its Founder.

4. The lack of individual autonomy

The individual, being created in the image of God, is not autonomous, because God in Scripture is revealed as being triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The implication for individuals made in the image of God is that complementary relationships are intrinsic to what it means to be human, just as God's revealed reality (His "ontology") is constituted by complementary relationships between the members of the Trinity. In the same way, man cannot be an autonomous individual. To be created in the image of God means that to exist is to be relational. Therefore any concept of human rights must be seen in the context of man as a relational being. We cannot act any way that we like without regard for others. Rights are not simply individualistic but pertain to the individual within relationships.

5. The right to communal relationships

In the same way, human beings, created in the image of a triune God, cannot be rightfully deprived of communal relationships with others. Religion, in particular, is intrinsically communal, for it is God's ideal

that persons live in communion with each other, the world, and their God.[8] It is not good for people to be alone (Gen 2:18). When religion is forcibly privatized, it has ceased to be recognized as a right and religious liberty has historically been considered the first right from which all others stem.

6. The basis for equality

Being created in the image of God also gives real insights into the true nature of equality. The equality of women with men is built into the imago dei assertion, for example. All humans are equally reflections of God, regardless of whether they worship Him or not. Our very nature contradicts any Orwellian concept that "all are equal but some are more equal than others."

7. The basis for difference

This equality, however, is to be understood in the context of the image of the Trinity. As the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have equality, they also have complementary roles and interpersonal relationships among the Trinity. This intercommunication among the three does not mean that they are not distinguishable from each other. Equality does not equal sameness. Being created in the image of the triune God makes each person unique.[9] While all humans are equal, they do not have to be the same.

8. The basis for freedom

The nature of the Trinity also reflects freedom. The members of the Trinity freely love each other. In the Gospel accounts of the events that transpired in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see the Son having to choose whether He will obey the Father. He struggles. It is not His desire to die, but He freely chooses to do that which He knows is right.

While freedom of choice was part of our original, created state, as fallen human beings we can no longer truly claim to have a truly "free will." Paul tells us in Romans 1 that we consistently choose the wrong, and even the right we do choose is often tarnished with ulterior motives. While some would argue that this must require an irresistible

[8] Roderick T. Leupp, *Knowing the Name of God.* Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 1996:95.

[9] Ibid.

act on God's part, it seems to me that a better explanation is found in what may be described in Wesleyan circles as "prevenient grace," whereby God frees our will to obey Him and to choose to follow Him. Hence, I believe that it is far more accurate to refer to the "freed will," rather than to "free will." The former still gives the full glory to God; the latter does not take sin seriously enough and makes it sound like the mind was unaffected by the Fall and sin.[10]

Still, even in our fallen state we yearn for freedom that can and should provide the environment for unrestricted practice of worship and propagation of the faith. The free expression of one's beliefs is to be upheld and promoted as God's intended plan for His image bearers. The Edenic ideal should not be discarded. As we have noted, in societies where biblical Christianity has had a greater influence on societal norms and values, we catch a glimpse of the Edenic ideal. Even there, however, as in the rest of the fallen world, this freedom is constantly threatened and never experienced consistently. As we shall see in our discussion of Genesis 3, the process of restoring God's creation to its intended state will be one of conflict. Ideally, religious freedom is a good thing. In this fallen world, however, the absence of religious persecution can also be a sign that the process of restoration has slowed or stalled as God's messengers stop being His agents of reconciliation in a hostile world. Hence, Christians should work to establish and maintain religious liberty. This is God's ideal, but not for our own comfort and not at the expense of our evangelistic zeal.

Having established the foundation for human rights and religious liberty in Genesis 1 and 2, we must, of necessity, continue reading through Genesis 3, which explains why things are not as they ought to be.

The biblical basis for persecution

It is noteworthy that at the end of Genesis 1 and 2, we find God announcing that creation is "good." Yet, in the very first verse of chapter 3, we find something that apparently is not good:

> Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?

Two initial observations are noteworthy:

[10] Space prevents further discussion on this important subject.

- From the nature of the question it is obvious that the serpent (Satan) is already in rebellion against God.
- The fact that Satan can be in rebellion, and creation is still considered "good" by God tells us that Satan is not responsible for our world being what it is today. Satan is not the one to blame for the world being "not good." These observations become clear in 3:2-13.

In verses 2-7 we witness how the relationship between God and His image bearers has been broken, as the reflection seeks to supplant the Reality. Rather than enjoying the unique relationship with their Creator and the unrestricted access to God that they had known and been privileged to, they now hide (verse 8). Religious freedom in the Edenic experience is no longer truly possible. Yet, God still seeks out those whom He created to have fellowship with Him (verses 9-11).

Exposed and challenged with the reality of their disobedience, both Adam and Eve look for someone to blame (verses 12,13). The man blames the woman and, indirectly, God (*the woman whom you gave to be with me*). The woman blames the snake. And, as one of my seminary professors liked to say whenever he referred to this passage, the snake didn't have a leg to stand on. In reality, Satan had beguiled the woman, the woman had listened to the serpent, and the man had listened to the woman - but no one had listened to God.[11] As a result, God issues a prophetic word of judgment and deliverance to the serpent (verses 14,15), the woman (verse 16), and the man (verses 17-19).[12]

Notice in verses 14, 15 that God does not say that nature is cursed because of the serpent, but that he will be more cursed than the rest of nature. He is condemned to humiliation and ultimate defeat under the victorious offspring of the woman. Satan's judgment, accomplished through human instrumentality, will bring deliverance to the offspring of the woman, but in a process of bruising and pain. The deliverance will come through the crushing of the serpent's head, but in the process the heel that crushes him will be bruised. This motif of deliverance in the process of pain is repeated in the words that follow to the woman and her husband.

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[11] Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978:78.

[12] Ibid.

The nature of the woman's curse in verse 16 is rooted in the nature of her sin. As Raymond Ortlund notes, the woman's curse is twofold. First, as a mother, she will suffer in relation to her children.

> She will still be able to bear children. This is God's mercy providing the means by which He will carry out His death sentence on the serpent. But now the woman will suffer in childbirth. This is God's severity for her sin. The new element in her experience, then, is not childbirth but the pain of childbirth.[13]

Second, as a wife, she will suffer in relation to her husband. Ortlund comments, "The exact content of her marital suffering could be defined in either of two ways. Either she will suffer conflict with her husband, or she will suffer domination by him." There are two factors that lead me to conclude that the former interpretation is to be preferred. First, in the following chapter, there is a passage (4:7) that is virtually identical to that in 3:16. In 4:7, Cain is told that sin has a desire for him, but he must master it. Sin's desire was to control Cain and have its way with him. Virtually identical phraseology is found in 3:16 and helps to explain the woman's "desire" for her husband. God tells the woman that the relationship between her and her husband will be one of conflict and control. God gives her up to a desire to control him, to have her way with him, to exercise spiritual leadership (just as she had done during the serpent's temptation), but her husband must not allow this to happen. He must assume his role as the head. This interpretation most closely follows the reasoning in 4:7. The second reason I favour this interpretation is that it mirrors the curse of the serpent in that it first defines the curse, and then is followed by a statement of hope. The hope of the strained relationship between the woman and her husband is not in the competition that is a result of the Fall but in the restoration of the relationship that they had prior to it. This was a relationship where the man was the spiritual head and the wife functioned as helpmate and partner.

It is in verses 17-19 that we finally understand why creation is no longer "good." Having been given stewardship over the world, Adam will now find his work painful. Just as childbirth was not the woman's curse, neither is work to be seen as man's curse. Work is part of what it means to be created in the image of God. But now, because of the

[13] Raymond C. Ortlund, "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship" in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood.* ed. by John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem. Wheaton: Crossway, 1991:97.

Fall, man's work will be painful and temporal. He will spend his entire life working the soil, only to return to it at the end.

This is not the way he was created to function. Failure and pain are not due to one being "human" but because one is "fallen." The fault is not with creation, God, or even with Satan. The culprit responsible for this world's condition is man, created in the image of God, who decided that being an image bearer was insufficient. The image of God sought equality with God.

But man is not without hope. In verse 22, God casts him out of the garden as an act of grace "lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever." Because of the Fall, immortality would be unbearable as sin would multiply out of control in the life of the individual and throughout society. Death is, hence, an act of grace, controlling the depth and scope of depravity.

But man's "deadness" is not merely physical. He is dead spiritually and this requires God's intervention – the crushing of the serpent's head, whereby restoration to fellowship with God and spiritual "aliveness" is enabled. This is what was promised to the woman.

And Adam remembers this promise contained in God's words concerning the offspring of the woman who would bruise the serpent's head. So we read Adam, in his role as spiritual head, giving the woman the name "Eve" (hawwah) from which "life" (hay) will come. The play on words is significant and deliberate. There is hope in the offspring of the woman. Just as Adam came from "adamah" (Hebrew for "earth"), so life (hay) will come from Eve (hawwah). Ortlund notes:

> By these dreadful, and yet hopeful, oracles of destiny (3:14–19), God shapes for us the existence we all share today. Under these conditions, our pain alerts us to a great truth: This life is not our fulfillment. This life is not meant to be a final experience. Our pain and limitations point us to God, to the eternal, to the transcendent, where our true fulfillment lies.
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> Adam understood this truth, I think. Instead of turning away from the bar of God's justice in bitterness and despair, Adam turns to his wife and says, "I believe God's promise. He has not cast us adrift completely. He will give us the final victory over our enemy and we will again enjoy the richness and fullness of life in God. And because

> you are the mother of all those who will truly live, I give you a new name – Eve, Living One. I believe God, and I honor you." In contrast to the cruel, cutting words of verse 12, Adam reaches out in love to Eve and they are reunited in faith and hope.[14]

Note, however, that the solution to man's suffering because of sin will come *through* suffering. The heel will be struck. In the process of crushing the serpent, the heel of the woman's offspring will be bruised. The setting is that of conflict between the serpent and the woman, which is echoed in Revelation 12. It is in Genesis 3 that we see the basis for the coming persecution of God's people. The reconciling of creation to its Creator will take place in a context of suffering and conflict.

Following the creation of man and the giving of man's divine mandate to be fruitful and multiply, to subdue the earth and exercise dominion as His image bearer (1:22,26,28), God declares that His work of creation is finished (šābat) (2:3). In His work of restoring creation to this condition of perfection, God will make two other proclamations of His work being "finished."[15] The second time is on the cross when redemption promised becomes redemption accomplished (John 19:30). The third is in Revelation 21:6 when God's work is once and for all finished. Not only will the punishment and penalty of sin be accomplished but also the very presence of sin will be removed and full restoration will be achieved. But God's plan of restoration did not begin at the Fall, as though it were unexpected. From the very beginning, God designed a plan to restore His creation to the place where it can again be declared "good."

It is obvious from the biblical record that God created man knowing he would rebel and that He had drawn up careful plans to deal with the consequences. This foreknowledge does not make God responsible for the Fall, in as much as He gave man genuine freedom from creation to freely choose or to freely reject His love. Being created in the image of God, man was capable of genuine independent choice and, like God, capable of real love.[16] Absolute free will is a prerequisite of true love. Forced or predetermined love is no love at all. In His creation of man, God had to allow for the possibility (indeed, the inevitability) that His love would be rejected in order that

[14] Ortlund: 99.
[15] Kaiser: 76.
[16] A. E. Wilder-Smith, *Why Does God Allow It?* San Diego: Master, 1980:51.

those who would respond to His grace would do so genuinely. As the early church fathers understood, force is no attribute of God.[17] To create mankind in His image but deny them the freedom not to love and trust Him would have been a violation of His own character. God created a world knowing that His representatives would reject Him, subjecting His creation to ruin. Yet, He chose to do so to the end that His glory and character might be perfectly seen in the restoration and enjoyed by those who submitted to His grace in their lives. Knowing this, He set His plan in motion, as the Scriptures say, from the foundation of the world, doing everything possible to bring restoration and completeness back to His creation.

But the path to this full restoration will be of conflict, pain, and bruising, as foretold in Genesis 3:15. It does not take long for this conflict to be manifested.

Cain and Abel

It is interesting to note that the first case of persecution in the Bible begins in a place of worship. In the first recorded time of formal worship before the Lord, we find the sons of Adam and Eve bringing offerings to the Lord in Genesis 4:2-5.

We are not told exactly why Cain's offering was unacceptable to God, while Abel's pleased him. It is likely that Cain brought simply some samples of his harvest, whereas Abel made certain that what he brought was only the best. Thus Abel gave out of faith and thankfulness, whereas Cain gave only out of duty.

Likewise, we are not told how God expressed His displeasure with Cain's offering, but it was obviously done in such a manner that Cain understood and was angry that God should respond that way to his sacrifice. The Lord refused to ignore Cain's response and, in grace, calls him to repentance in verses 6-7.

That Cain did not heed God's call to rule over his anger and instead allowed it to master him is evident. Cain refused to bow the knee before God and he decided to rid himself of his religious opponent, even if it is his own brother. At this point we witness the first incident of religious persecution as Cain rose up and killed Abel (verse 8).

[17] cf. Penner: 101-104.

It is obvious that the New Testament views Abel's death as much more than the result of sibling rivalry or a family squabble that got out of control. Jesus clearly saw Abel's death as an act of martyrdom (Matt 23:35), as does the apostle John (1 Jn 3:12). John explains that Abel's death was because Cain's acts were evil and Abel's were righteous. Abel's death is clearly set in a context of martyrdom, a result of the conflict between the world and those who belong to God (1 Jn 3:13).

Not only did persecution begin because of religious intolerance, but it also took place in the home. Just as it divided the first family, loyalty to God continues to cut families asunder, providing stark demonstrations of the cruel reality of the conflict between the seed of the woman and the serpent. Families, as important as they are for our nurture and security, can also be places of terrible violence.

The Lord's response to Abel's murder is instructive to us. He says that the voice of Abel's blood "is crying to me from the ground" (4:10). The word used here for "crying" (sa'aq) is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe the outcry of the individual or group who are suffering injustice and require intervention on their behalf.[18] It often refers to God hearing the outcries of the oppressed because they have been denied justice and are unable to defend themselves from unlawful oppression and exploitation.[19] On the use of the word in Genesis 18:20, Gerhard von Rad comments that the word is a technical legal term and designates the cry for help which one who suffers a great injustice screams.[20]

> We even know what the cry was, namely, "Foul play!" (*hāmās*, Jer. 20.8; Hab. 1.2; Job 19.7). With this cry for help (which corresponds to the old German *Zeterruf*), he appeals for the protection of the legal community. What it does not hear or grant, however, comes directly before Yahweh as the guardian of all right (cf. ch. 4.10). Yahweh, therefore, is not concerned with punishing Sodom but rather with an

[18] John E. Hartley, (sā'aq) in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke. Chicago: Moody, 1980:772.

[19] Paul Marshall, "Human Rights" in *Toward an Evangelical Public Policy*. ed. Ronald J. Sider and Diane Knippers. Grand Rapids: Baker: 2004:313.

[20] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, A Commentary. Revised edition*. Norwich: SCM, 1961:211.

> investigation of the case, which is serious, to be sure. The proceeding is hereby opened.[21]

Novak observes that it is here that we read of the very first appeal made to God to enforce a human right, in this case the human right to have one's murder avenged.[22]

> Thus God says to Cain immediately after he has murdered his brother Abel, "What you have done! Your brother's blood is crying [tso.aqim] to Me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10).
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> In the Cain and Abel story, Abel has a claim upon Cain: Do not kill me! Why? Because God takes personal interest in every human person who has been created in the divine image. In fact, that is very likely what it means to say that all humankind is made to "resemble God" (Gen. 5:1), namely, God and humans are interested in each other insofar as they share some commonality, a commonality not found in God's relations with the rest of creation.[23]

God's justice requires that He punish Cain for the murder of his brother, for such an assault on any other human being is taken to be an assault on God himself. In sentencing him, however, God does not condemn Cain to being a disdained outcast, liable to vigilante justice.[24] This is what Cain fears (4:14). God, in His mercy, places a mark on Cain to protect him too from being wrongfully killed (Gen 4:8–17).

Cain had complained that he would be hidden from God's presence or face and terrified that he would be denied God's judicial protection. The imagery of God hiding His presence or face is a common one in Scripture, meaning to refuse to notice something and thus avoid responding to it.[25] The Lord's response is evidence that, even as a murderer, Cain is not beyond God's mercy and protection.[26] Cain's life, like Abel's and all humans', belongs to God and He will not abandon it. The right to life is protected by God, even for those who do not deserve it.

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[21] Ibid.

[22] David Novak, "God and Human Rights in a Secular Society: in *Does Human Rights Need God?* ed. Elizabeth M. Bucar and Barbra Barnett. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005:51.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] LeLand Ryken, James C. Wilmot, Tremper Longman III, "Hide, Hiding" in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery.* Downers Grove: IVP, 1998:383.

[26] Eugene F. Roop, *Genesis.* Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald, 1987:53.

Noah

Following the story of Cain, Noah becomes the next major character in the Old Testament narrative to whom considerable attention is drawn. The focus of our discussion, however, is not on Noah as the instrument of God's preservation of His creation, but on the instructions that God gives him regarding the preservation of human life in Genesis 9:5,6. From each man, God says, He will "require a reckoning for the life of man" (9:5b). However, unlike the situation with Cain and Abel when God appeared directly as a judge, this accounting was no longer solely God's exclusive responsibility. It is now shared with human beings.[27] This is reiterated in verse 6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, *by man* shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (emphasis added).

In this passage, God announces that mankind has been delegated the responsibility of being God's instruments of justice and upholders of basic human rights such as the right to life. They are not called upon to wait for divine retribution or intervention. This does not justify the use of vigilante justice, as the rest of Scripture makes clear. The responsibility for exercising this God-given instrumentality is placed in the hands of civil authorities who are given rights that individuals do not possess. But the responsibility to uphold and support the rights of one's fellow image bearers is a divine mandate. Those who cry out for justice should not be met with a wall of indifferent silence from those who claim to be fellow image bearers and especially not from those who are being renewed into the full image of God through the work of Jesus Christ.

Lot

Surprisingly, given the generally negative reputation he has been given, we read in 2 Peter 2:7 that Lot is described as a "righteous man who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men."

While by no means the best example of righteousness, Peter sees Lot's deliverance from Sodom as deliverance from persecution in 2 Peter 2:7–9.

From Lot's example we can see that persecution is not restricted to only mature believers or spiritual giants. All who claim to follow

[27] von Rad: 133.

God will undoubtedly be, at some point, called upon to take a stand. In Lot's case, while much of his life was characterized by compromise, to his credit he did rise to the challenge when called upon.

Abraham

When the biblical record seeks an example of faith, it inevitably points to Abraham. Called out of a pagan background, he was told to pack up, leave his home, and go to a land that God would show him. He is promised that God would make him into a great nation and a source of blessing for the entire world.

As God unfolded His plan for restoring the world to its original created state, Abraham plays a pivotal role (Gen 12:1–4; 15:5,6).

But the path of faith to which he has been called is not an easy one. For his entire life, he lived in a tent as a nomad. Hebrews 11, when referring to Abraham, puts it in this perspective: "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:9,10).

God promised him a son and then waited nearly Abraham's whole life before fulfilling it. Indeed, God waited until it is seemingly too late, and Abraham despairs. Then, after God fulfilled His promise, He made the shocking declaration that Abraham was to take his son up to a mountain and kill him. Can you imagine the anguish that Abraham must have felt? The confusion? Yes, even the doubts?

But Abraham obeyed. And at the very last moment, God intervened and provided a substitute in the form of a ram. Then, once again, He restated His original promise that Abraham would be the source of blessings for all nations because of his obedience (Gen 22:15–18).

Abraham's faithful obedience was not a painless one. It was a path marked with disappointments, pain, and tears. It was a path that did not see the complete fulfillment of God's promises in his lifetime. Instead, as Hebrews 11:16 says, "They were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

God's plan to reconcile the world to Himself involved calling a man away from home, familiarity, and comfort, taking him into exile into the wilderness to a strange land and into suffering and promise. From Abraham's life we glean the valuable lesson that true faith inevitably suffers, sacrifices, and hopes.

Isaac

Isaac continues Abraham's legacy. As he tries to make a home in the land that God has promised him, he suffers from the envy of the Philistines and others because of the evident blessing of God on his life. They fill or confiscate his wells, causing him to move on to other areas to water his herds. Finally, as his enemies witness God's continued blessing on his life and his refusal to retaliate, they make peace with him, leading to the end of persecution (Gen 26:12–33). But Isaac demonstrates that experiencing God's blessing may result in significant opposition and hardship. The call is to respond graciously, voluntarily depriving oneself in order to maintain one's integrity and witness before others.

Egypt's oppression of Israel

Israel is described in Scripture as being "oppressed" by Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Exod 1:11,12). They suffer not because of individual or corporate sin, but simply because of who they are as a people. The Lord declares that He is concerned about their suffering and desires to free them from the oppression of the Egyptians (Exodus 3:7–10). His desire and concern are concretely expressed in firstly coming down (3:8). Fretheim observes that God's "coming down" suggests that God sees suffering from the inside; He does not look at it from the outside as an observer. He enters fully into the hurtful situation and makes it his own.[28] Further, He raises up a deliverer in the very household of their oppressors.

In Exodus 2:15, Moses kills a guard who had been beating a fellow Israelite and consequently is forced to flee into exile when Pharaoh seeks his life in return. The author of Hebrews provides a commentary on what had led up to this action. Moses, he writes, was faced with a difficult choice. He could remain in the palace and enjoy

[28] Terence E. Fretheim. *The Suffering of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984:128.

the "passing pleasures of sin," or he could relinquish the palace and choose to be "mistreated along with the people of God" (11:24–26).

We know from the story recorded in Exodus that he chose the latter and dedicated his life to the liberation of his people from slavery and to the establishment of a people who would serve God. This choice involved Moses in a lifetime of hardship, toil, tears, and threats.[29] He faced opposition from both within the household of faith and from without - from Egyptian oppressors and from those he was sent to deliver. The author of Hebrews refers to Moses' actions as reproach "for the sake of Christ" as he looked ahead to a greater reward than that which he could have enjoyed as Egyptian royalty (11:26). Sacrificing for the purposes of God is a Christlike kind of reproach.

[29] E.g. Exod 17:4 where Moses is threatened with stoning by the people.