

Billy Graham: How Strong Is Your Armor?

What would you do if persecution came to Christians? In this excerpt from his newest book, evangelist Billy Graham presents five points to use as a checklist in determining the full strength of your "full armor."

What would you do if the major cities in your country were suddenly leveled by guided missiles or enemy bombers? How would you react to the seizure of all major industries, utilities and schools?

Or what if you were taken hostage by a group of terrorists? If you have never experienced the impact of such horrors, you probably have no answer to these questions.

In the event of a national catastrophe, what does the Christian do? What should his attitude be? Which way would he turn? What if persecution should come to the church in America as it has come in many other countries?

As a whole, America (in comparison with many other areas of the world) does not know what privation is. We have little conception as a nation of what real sacrifice and suffering mean.

The immunity from persecution which Christians in some countries of the world have experienced in the past two or three centuries is unusual. We have been living through an abnormal period, especially in recent years. Christianity has been almost popular, and in America it certainly is at the time I write.

Look at the hundreds of Christian books which are published every year. There are Christian movies as well as Christian television and radio programs. One of the oldest and most

prestigious American magazines has recently assumed a Christian tone. However, in my judgment, the time of this popularity will be shortened as secular materialism eats away at the vitals of the country.

In other parts of the world to be a Christian automatically exposes one to hardship, if not real persecution. Christ strongly warned His followers that to believe in Him would not be popular and that they should be prepared to face suffering and affliction for His sake.

Suffering Isn't Subnormal

The Bible says that all who want "to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). Jesus said that as the time of His return draws nigh, "they will seize you and persecute you" (Luke 21:12).

We have no scriptural foundation for believing that we can forever escape being physically persecuted for Christ's sake. The fact that we are not being persecuted is an abnormal condition. The normal condition for Christians is that they should suffer persecution.

Since we have experienced little religious persecution in this country, it is likely that under pressure many would deny Christ. It is entirely conceivable that the persecution of Christian believers now taking place in other parts of the world may also come to such areas as Europe, Australia, Canada and America.

Dr. Donald Coggan, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, in an address in London referred to his recent visit to a certain country and told of how he had seen something firsthand of the witness of Christians under persecution.

He said, "the faith of Christians is being tested in the fire. What a witness is theirs! How should we fare, I wonder, in similar circumstances? Are we too soft, cushy, easy in Britain

to be able to stand up to persecution? Should we defect? Or should we, like so many of them, triumph?"

This is a question to be seriously pondered. If persecution came, what would you and I do? For the most part we would do no more, no less, than we are doing right now. Some of us who shout the loudest about our faith would surrender soonest. Many who boast of being courageous would be the most cowardly. Many like Peter who say, "Though all others deny Christ, yet I will never deny Him," would be the first to warm their hands at the campfires of the enemy.

In speaking of the last times, Jesus warned, "Then they will hand you over to be persecuted and will kill you. And you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake" (Matt. 24:9). He also said, "Because iniquity will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt. 24:12).

Paul, referring to the conflict with "the spiritual forces of evil" wrote: "Therefore take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:13).

Here are five points to use as a checklist in determining the full strength of your "full armor." Write them down, refer to them daily, and act upon them.

Look Godward

First, we must make sure of our relationship to God. As Amos the prophet saw the day of judgment fast approaching for Israel, he warned the people to prepare to meet God (Amos 4:12). The word preparedness should be a key word for everyone.

It is strange that we prepare for everything except meeting God. We prepare for marriage and for a career. We prepare for athletic contests. A person attempting, to be on an Olympic team anywhere in the world practices his or her sport several

hours a day, perhaps for years, before he considers himself prepared. But we do not prepare to meet God.

Even though most of us see the storm clouds gathering on the horizon, by and large we are making few preparations to meet God. This is a time for repentance and faith. It is a time for soul-searching, a time to see if our anchor holds.

Walk With God

Second, we should learn now to walk with God in our daily life.

Abraham walked with God and was called a friend of God (Is. 41:8; James 2:23). Walk with God as Moses did in the solitude of the desert; when the hour of judgment fell upon Egypt, Moses was prepared to lead his people to victory. Walk with God as David did as a shepherd boy; when he was called to rule his people he was prepared for the task of kingship.

Daniel and his three young friends walked with God in Babylon, and when trouble came, God was beside them—whether it was in the lions' den or in the fiery furnace.

However, the Bible teaches that God does not always deliver His saints from adversity. As we have seen, a careful reading of Hebrews 11 shows that “others” were just as faithful as Abraham, Moses, Daniel or David; they, too, walked with God—but they perished. God has not promised to deliver us from trouble, but He has promised to go with us through the trouble.

Stephen was a young man “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). They stoned him to death, but his was a triumphal entry into heaven. If you are not strengthening the inner man now by daily walking with God, when a crisis comes you will quake with fear and give in, having no strength to stand up for Christ.

Work With the Word

Third, we need to fortify ourselves with the Word of God. Begin reading, studying and memorizing Scripture as never before.

Paul says, “Stand therefore, having your waist girded with truth” (Eph. 6:14). The truth is the Word of God. He also says, “Take the ... sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (v. 17). We are to be girded and undergirded with the Word.

To achieve this, we must read it, assimilate it, feed on it. We must let it be our staff and strength. It is quick and powerful—the bulwark of the soul.

To many, Scripture is little more than a reference book of biblical facts. It is seldom opened and rarely relished as the spiritual staff of life which it is. Many Christians are anemic and starved for the things of God. They are totally unprepared for a time of crisis or conflict. We need to make the Scriptures a daily part of our lives, storing God’s Word in our hearts and minds. Then, if our Bible is ever taken away from us, we can readily recall it, feed upon it and inwardly digest it.

Countless stories have come out of prison camps of Christians who had no Bibles but who had committed to memory great portions of Scripture. What a comfort, blessing and strength those Scriptures were as they repeated them over and over again to themselves. One Christian who was in a prison camp for three years told me that during his imprisonment his greatest regret was not having memorized more of the Bible.

Practice Prayer

Fourth, we need to fortify ourselves with prayer. The Bible, referring to “the evil days,” says “pray in the Spirit always with all kinds of prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:18). If we

are to stand uncompromisingly for Christ when a national crisis comes, we must rediscover the power of prayer. Jesus taught us that we ought “always to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

The early church knew the value and necessity of prayer. Earnest, fervent prayer preceded every major triumph. Prayer preceded Pentecost.

The church in Jerusalem prayed in time of persecution, and as a result “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). When the apostle Peter was imprisoned by King Herod, the believers in Jerusalem prayed and he was miraculously released (Acts 12:1-17).

Paul and Silas prayed in prison; the Philippian jailer found Christ, and the prisoners were delivered (Acts 16:25-34).

If Christianity is to survive in a godless and materialistic world, we must repent of our prayerlessness. We must make prayer our priority. The prayer meeting should be the most important and meaningful service of any church.

In the Old Testament we read of a wicked, pagan, powerful king by the name of Sennacherib. This Assyrian leader had made his boastful announcement that he would by force subdue God’s people and possess their land. His propaganda machine went into action. He sent messages to Israel saying, “Who from among all the gods of these nations that my fathers utterly destroyed was able to rescue his people from my hand? For will your god be able to rescue you all from my hand?” (2 Chr. 32:14).

Assyria had built a vast and formidable war machine which had run ruthlessly over the nations of Judah and Israel. In the arms race of their day the Assyrians were definitely ahead! Their armored soldiers policed the subdued, conquered countries just as is happening in some countries today. The whole world trembled when Sennacherib spoke!

Hezekiah, Israel's king, realized that on the purely human level the Assyrians could make good their proud boasts. They were superior in manpower and arms; no nation had been able to withstand them. Hezekiah knew full well that without God's help his people would be wiped off the face of the earth. He trusted in God implicitly—and his secret weapon was prayer.

The Bible says, "Hezekiah the king and Isaiah the prophet son of Amoz prayed concerning this" (2 Chr. 32:20). Get this dramatic picture: a king and a prophet of God on their knees before God in earnest prayer. Then a miracle happened!

The account continues: "So the Lord sent an angel and destroyed the mighty army, leaders, and officials in the camp of the king of Assyria. So the king [Sennacherib] returned in shame to his own land. ... So the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria, and from the hand of all others, and gave them rest on every side" (2 Chr. 32:21-22).

Miracles have happened in history when God's people have turned to Him in prayer. His word to us is still this: "Call on Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will glorify Me" (Ps. 50:15).

A call for national and individual repentance is urgently needed today, or judgment is certain to fall. I believe in being prepared as a nation, in being so strong that we will not invite attack. But no amount of military preparation can take the place of spiritual preparedness. We need the inner strength that comes from a personal, vital relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ.

I read an article recently in a British newspaper whose headline asked: "Britain—Will it Survive?" The writer went on to say that five years from now, unless Britain has a moral and spiritual reawakening, it will be in the grip of a new type of atheistic, materialistic government.

The first thing Hezekiah and Isaiah did when a national crisis broke over their land was to fall upon their knees before Almighty God. They did not pray for God to be on their side, but they prayed that they might be on God's side. In answer to their earnest pleas and because of their consistently righteous way of life, God sent a battalion of heavenly warriors to deliver them.

But God does not always deliver His children out of crises and catastrophe. For example, during the trials and tribulations of the '70s, many people in Uganda prayed earnestly to the Lord to deliver them. The evil regime in that country has taken the lives of many believers. The Lord delivered them, but not in the way they had expected. It is up to us as Christians to accept whatever God sends, and to be prepared in our hearts and minds for change and revolution—and even torture and death.

Corrie ten Boom tells how, in the midst of the horrors of Ravensbruck prison camp, she learned to pray. Prayer was her constant resort. Through prayer she knew the reality of Christ in her life, even when the burdens were quite overwhelming.

She prayed, "Lord, teach me to cast all my burdens upon Thee and go on without them. Only Thy Spirit can teach me that lesson. Give me Thy Spirit, O Lord, and I shall have faith, such faith that I shall no longer carry a load of care."

Practice the Presence of Christ

Fifth, we must fortify ourselves by realizing the nearness of the Lord at all times. Spurgeon once said, "There have never been 15 minutes in my life when I did not sense the presence of Christ." I regret I cannot say that. We must learn again to practice the presence of Christ, not only in days of testing and suffering, but always.

We are surely encouraged to do that by Christ's final promise to His disciples after He had commissioned them to go and make

disciples of all nations. He said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). It is a promise for obedient disciples and it is marvelously inclusive.

Dr. Handley Moule, sometime Anglican Bishop of Durham, England and a noted Greek scholar, maintained that the always could be paraphrased to mean, "I am with you all the days, all day long."

That means we can count on Christ's presence not only every day, but every moment of every day. Of the fact of His presence there can be no doubt, for His Word cannot fail. What we need is to cultivate the sense of His presence, every day, every hour, every moment.

A few years ago my wife, Ruth, had a terrible fall. She suffered a concussion, was unconscious for nearly a week, broke her foot in five places and injured her hip. When she regained consciousness she found she had lost a great deal of her memory.

What disturbed her most was that she had forgotten so many of the Scriptures she had learned throughout the years. The verses of a whole lifetime were more precious to her than all earthly possessions.

One night when she was praying, because she was so distressed, out of-nowhere came the verse, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love ... " She has no recollection of ever memorizing this verse, but the Lord brought it back to her. Gradually, other verses began to come back. But interestingly, while she was still trying to recover her memory she memorized Romans 8:31-39 and repeated these verses over and over again:

"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns?

It is Christ who died, yes, who is risen, who is also at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: ‘For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.’

“No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities nor powers, neither things present nor things to come, neither height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I urge you to memorize this passage. Hide it away in your heart. When persecution, trouble and adversity arise, these verses will come back to you a thousand times.

Christ must be vitally real to us if we are to remain faithful to Him in the hour of crisis. And who knows how near that hour may be?

The wheels of God’s judgment can be heard by discerning people in the assembly of the United Nations, in the conferences of political leaders, in the offices of the editors of great newspapers or television networks around the world—and among the people throughout the nations.

Things are happening fast! The need for a turning to God has never been more urgent.

The words of Isaiah, whom God used to confound an ancient, godless aggressor, are appropriate for us today: “Seek the Lord while He may be found; call you upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon”

(55:6-7).

David proved that outward armor is not nearly so important as the man within the armor. Unless men of purpose, integrity, and faith stand together in unswerving loyalty to Jesus Christ, the future of the world is dark indeed.

Strengthen the Family

To prepare ourselves for the suffering and persecution which seems so inevitable, we need also to foster and strengthen the small group movement, the concept of "Christian cells." One obvious area where this process should take place is in the family.

In the United States today, as well as in other parts of the world, we are witnessing the breakdown and erosion of the family unit. Divorce is rampant and "living together" without the formality of a wedding ceremony is increasingly common. It is only the strong Christian family unit that can survive the coming world holocaust.

To prepare for the crisis to come, we need to nurture and undergird the family unit. The previous points I have mentioned can be applied to our family lives. First, we need to place God at the center of our family life and make Him the circumference as well. Second, as a family we need to walk with God daily. Third, consulting and memorizing Scripture as a family is vital. Not a day should go by without a time of family fellowship around the Word of God. Together the family should "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" the Scriptures as an essential preparation for the persecution ahead.

Family prayer is the fourth vital link in the chain of spiritual strength—a strength we are trying to build to protect us from a world gone mad. The habit of praying together as a family is one of the most strengthening factors in unifying and energizing the members of that family to go out into a troubled world.

Only by direct contact with God through prayer can we hope to have the serenity and security that will enable us to witness for Christ in the world outside. The practice of prayer as a family also equips its individual members to pray effectively amid the pressure of daily living. The home is the best place to learn spiritual lessons such as these.

What I have said about the family unit is also true concerning the value of the small, intimate groups or fellowships springing up inside and outside the organized church today. When brothers and sisters in Christ unite in the common bond of the Word of God and prayer, they are strengthened in their faith and witness.

The support of others is especially helpful when suffering comes. Scripture urges us to bear "one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2, KJV); to "comfort yourselves together, and edify one another" (1 Thess. 5:11). This can best be done in small Christian groups; and when it is done, amazing things can happen.

For example, we are learning that the church in China has survived the more than 25 years of severe restrictions. How? Through the health and existence of "house churches." These consist of small groups of believers, who, though driven "underground" during the cultural revolution, managed to meet regularly around the Word.

Despite the concerted effort to destroy all the Bibles in China, some copies survived and around these, or the verses and even passages believers had memorized, small groups of Christians met. Chinese Christians in prisons and labor camps have allowed the flame of their faith to burn brightly and have been used to lead other Chinese to the Lord.

What About Ourselves?

The challenge is a personal one and concerns each one of us. In the end, the best way we can prepare for suffering of any

kind is by seeking continually to deepen our spiritual lives—by which I mean to deepen our life in the Spirit.

The apostle Paul's exhortation to the Christians of his day was to "be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). It was not merely a counsel: it was a command. And the verb in the Greek is in the present tense, conveying the idea of continuance. "Keep on being filled with the Spirit" is what Paul is saying here.

This is not a one-time happening, but an ongoing experience. We are to be catch basins for the fullness of God. Like a freshly running spring, we are to overflow and let our lives touch the lives of those around us.

This is the way we are to prepare for whatever is in store for us in the critical and testing times that lie ahead. When the "evil day" comes, we shall have to be dependent not on the circumstances around us, but on the hidden resources within us. And those resources are not of ourselves but of God. Be filled with the Spirit!'