

Suffering Abuse from Church Leaders

Special Topical Lesson

I. Introduction - Why this Lesson?

- a. I continue to encounter many who have suffered some type of mistreatment or abuse at the hands of church leaders in churches they have been a part of.
- b. In a recent church midweek time gathering, I asked the question of the group: “What would you say to someone who had been through a painful experience at the hands of church leaders and who was tempted to become bitter or even to reject the Christian faith?”
 - i. “Also, what points would you make from the Bible to address their situation and their feelings?”
- c. This question clearly ‘hit home’, in a personal way, for many in our church (which included disciples from different church backgrounds).
 - i. Either they or someone they were close to had struggled with this.
 - ii. After listening to everyone’s thoughts and insights, I went last and gave the outline of seven points I would want to make, along with some of the Scripture passages and Biblical examples I might use.
 - 1. Someone in the group asked if someday I could present the whole lesson I had quickly outlined.
 - 2. A few days later, an old friend shared that someone he was very close to struggled mightily with this. He also said he would like to hear what I would say about this.
 - 3. Then a neighbor shared that he has a friend who has had similar struggles.
 - iii. My own situation: While I had many struggles with church leaders in the past, I don’t think I ever became *bitter* about it.
 - 1. In fact, some people who saw up close what I had gone through later told me they wondered how I was able to make it through those trials relatively unscathed!
- d. My hope is that this lesson might help those who are struggling with things that happened in the past at the hands of other professing Christians. Specifically, that they could work through these things without misplacing the

blame for evil things that were done by putting it on Jesus, the Father or the Word of God (the Bible).

- i. My hope is that people who have been in bad situations like this will be able to see God clearly and put the blame where it really belongs.

II. Churches (and Church Leaders) Can be Abusive

- a. Many who become Christians have an idealized picture of how the church is. They believe that now that they have encountered the family of God, the sins that they saw in the world will not be there. They trust the church and its leaders, and their faith is badly damaged or even shattered when they face sins, abuses and extreme disappointment.
- b. This sin or abuse can come in various forms, including:
 - i. Deceit or hypocrisy they have seen from church leaders.
 - ii. Financial corruption.
 - iii. Betrayal of a trust or confidence in personal matters.
 - iv. Sexual sins or sexual abuse.
 - v. Covering up the sins of leaders.
 - vi. Extreme peer pressure to conform to the group or a controlling leadership structure.
 - vii. Church leaders who cannot be questioned or challenged.
 - viii. Deliberate manipulation or misrepresentation of the Scriptures in teaching and preaching, to advance some man-made agenda.
 - ix. Equating not following the non-Biblical directives of church leaders as disobeying God.
 - x. Cult-like claims of a particular denomination being the one (and only) true church.
- c. For those who have had bad experiences with church leaders in the past, this can result in:
 - i. Bitterness that does not go away.
 - ii. Distrusting all churches and all church leaders everywhere.

- iii. Becoming angry toward God.
- iv. Worst case: a complete rejection of the entire Christian faith.
 - 1. (Reasoning that if the God of the Bible truly existed , He would not have allowed this abuse to happen).

III. Point No. 1: Satan is Real

- a. The modern gospel is presented as a story having two players: you and God.
 - i. You have a problem: sin, which will send you to hell.
 - ii. God saves you from your problem through the blood of His son Jesus.
 - iii. Therefore, (by this reasoning) if anything bad happens, it must be either our fault (if we sinned) *or God's fault*.
- b. In reality, the gospel story in the Scriptures involves three parties/participants: God, us, *and Satan*.
 - i. Consider the story of the exodus from Egypt, which foreshadowed the Christian journey, involved three parties: God, Pharaoh and the Israelites under Moses.
 - 1. You cannot appreciate the story of liberation from bondage in Egypt unless you understand that Pharaoh was the oppressive ruler who would not let God's people go.
 - ii. "He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, *that He might destroy the works of the devil.*" (**1 John 3:8**, NKJV)
 - iii. "We know that we are of God, and *the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.*" (**1 John 5:19**, NKJV)
 - 1. Jesus came to liberate us from the sway/control of Satan.
 - iv. On the road to Damascus, Jesus appeared to Paul and told him: "I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and *from the power of Satan to God*, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me." (**Acts 26:17-18**, NKJV)
- c. Satan's activity against us does not end when we become Christians. (Salvation involves more than just a one-time jail break-out!) Satan continues to attack the

church and still tempts and continues to assault Christians after their conversion.

- i. “And the Lord said, “Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.” (**Luke 22:31-32**, NKJV)
 1. [Note: A good friend, Joseph Porter, after hearing this lesson, pointed out something in this passage that I had missed. When Jesus says, “Satan has asked to sift you as wheat”, the word “you” in Greek is in the plural (referring to more than just one person).]
 2. Consider also the example of Job, who God handed over to Satan to put through an extreme test of suffering. (**Job 1:6-12**)
- ii. Paul describes the Christian life as a being in an intense battle against a powerful enemy. He says:
 1. “Put on the whole armor of God, *that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil*. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (**Ephesians 6:11-12**, NKJV)
 2. Paul is saying here that our problem is not with people (flesh and blood). Instead, the problem is that Christians are under powerful assault by *Satan and all the forces of evil with him* (the angels with him, who also rebelled against God).
- iii. “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” (**1 Peter 5:8**, NKJV)
- iv. “But Peter said, ‘Ananias, *why has Satan filled your heart* to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?’” (**Acts 5:3**, NKJV)
 1. Ananias is a Christian who was giving money to the church. Satan “filled his heart to lie”, bringing a full-scale attack in which Ananias ended up being destroyed.
- v. “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, *the devil is about to throw some of you into prison*, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (**Revelation 2:10**, NKJV)

- vi. ““I know your works, and where you dwell, *where Satan’s throne is...*”
(**Revelation 2:13**, NKJV)
- vii. In the daily prayer, the Lord’s prayer, Jesus instructs us to pray:
 - 1. “...And do not lead us into temptation, *but deliver us from the evil one.* For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”
(**Matthew 6:13**, NKJV)
- d. **Question:** If Satan asked to sift Peter like wheat and did the same to Job (a righteous man unlike anyone else on the face of the earth in his day), what do you think he is going to do to anyone who wants to spread the gospel and advance the kingdom of God?
 - i. **Question:** If any church or church leader has the potential to impact thousands of people for the sake of Christ, to pull them out of Satan’s kingdom of darkness and bring them into the light, do you think Satan is going to ignore them?
 - 1. **Question:** Do any of us think Satan will be intimidated or deterred from assaulting any group of Christians because of their:
 - a. doctrinal precision,
 - b. appropriate type of clothing,
 - c. orderly families,
 - d. miraculous signs they can perform,
 - e. material success,
 - f. projects for the poor, or
 - g. their impressive numerical growth?
 - 2. **Question:** Do you think Satan is likely to be scared off by their worldly wealth, rituals, pageantry, church lineage or architecturally impressive buildings, and thereby *leave them alone*?
 - ii. Satan will want to attack everybody and exploit their weaknesses (ego, greed, materialism, desires of the flesh, pride, selfishness, desires for power over others, etc.).
 - 1. I believe the closer a Christian is to the truth, the more dangerous he or she is to Satan and Satan’s kingdom, and the more he or she should expect to be assaulted!

- iii. He will want to do anything possible to sow division among Christians and to discredit Jesus, the gospel and the Scriptures, including through hypocritical church leaders.
- e. **A Question I Often Ask:** When it is hard for me to discern what God wants me to do, I ask myself the question: “What do I think *Satan* wants me to do in this situation?” Then I strive do *the opposite* of that!
 - i. Satan is rather predictable. If we study him and learn his tactics, we are not as liable to be taken by surprise.
 - 1. He has used the same tricks throughout the ages, to great effect with many.
- f. So, recognize that Satan exists and his tactics to lead Christians (and Christian leaders) into sin. This will help you understand how corrupt and wicked Christian leaders come into the church.

IV. Point No. 2: There Will be Some Bad People in the Church

- a. Some people have the mistaken idea that the church will be a perfect place with honest, loving and holy people (only) in it, if we “do everything right”.
 - i. This approach is often pushed by churches that market themselves as a safe, accepting family and a loving community of wonderful people.
 - 1. There is some truth to this. Christians are called to be a loving family, a holy people, the body of Christ, the radiant bride of Christ, and a temple in which God dwells.
 - 2. Christians are called to live by the highest ethical standards in the Sermon on the Mount (**Matthew 5-7**) and to follow the example of Jesus.
 - a. Jesus said: “This is My commandment, that you *love one another as I have loved you*. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” (**John 15:12-13**, NKJV)
 - b. “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to *walk just as He walked*.” (**1 John 2:6**, NKJV)
 - ii. The Scriptures also call church leaders to put wicked people out of the church.
 - 1. “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do

you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person.'" (1 **Corinthians 5:11-13**, NKJV)

2. Churches need to be disciplined: put wicked people out of the church when sin is obvious, in order to prevent sin (like yeast) from spreading throughout the church. (1 **Corinthians 5:6-7**)
- b. On the other hand, Jesus clearly taught that the church, the kingdom of God on earth prior to His return and the Day of Judgment, *would have some wicked people in it*.
 - i. In the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (**Matthew 13**)
 1. Read **Matthew 13:24-30**, along with the explanation in **13:36-43**.
 2. First, the farmer sowed the good seed in the field.
 - a. The farmer represents the Son of Man, Jesus.
 3. Then, while people were sleeping, the enemy sowed *tares* (weeds that look similar to wheat) among the growing wheat. We see here that the field that was initially sown only with wheat is later corrupted with weeds!
 4. The servants are puzzled that weeds are growing up among the wheat. The farmer explains that this is the work of the evil one, the devil.
 5. The servants want to pull out all the weeds, but the farmer tells them not to, lest they also uproot the wheat in the process. He explains that this will be sorted out at the harvest (at the end of the age), by the angels.
 6. Read **Matthew 13:38-43**.
 - a. "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather *out of His kingdom* all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness...." (**Matthew 13:41**, NKJV)
 - c. Parable of the Dragnet (**Matthew 13**)
 - i. Read **Matthew 13:47-50**.
 - ii. Here, the kingdom of God is like a dragnet. It captures "some of every kind".
 1. Both good fish and bad fish will be in the kingdom.

2. The angels will sort out the bad ones in the end (representing the Day of Judgment).
- d. Paul, in **2 Timothy 2**, speaks of there being vessels for *honor* as well as for *dishonor* in the same “great house”.
 - i. Read **2 Timothy 2:20-22**.
 - ii. This statement is made within a letter regarding the dangers of false teachers and corruption in the church. Their message and influence are spreading like a “cancer” within the church.
 - iii. Like his reference here to the “great house”, Paul used a similar illustration of the church being “the house of God” in his first letter to Timothy.
 1. “...but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in *the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.*” (**1 Timothy 3:15**, NKJV)
 - iv. The “great house” (representing the church) has vessels of honor and dishonor in it, just as the dragnet of **Matthew 13** had good and bad fish in it.
 1. *Vessels of honor* in a house might include containers made of gold or silver.
 2. *Vessels of dishonor* within the same house might include old-fashioned chamber pots for holding human waste in a society that did not have the benefit of indoor plumbing!
 - v. Paul uses a similar analogy in **1 Corinthians 3:5-17**, where he speaks of the church as being like a building. Whatever is built will be tested by fire on the Day of Judgment.
 1. Some people build the church with wood, hay and straw, which will be burned up.
 2. However, others build with gold, silver and precious stones. These will pass the test of fire and not be burned up.
 - e. Early Christian writer Cyprian, a bishop of the church in Carthage, North Africa, writing c. 250 AD, touches on this idea of the church having good and bad people in it. It is important to note that Cyprian had what most of us would consider very high (strict) standards regarding church discipline for those involved in sins, such as denying or compromising the faith during a time of severe persecution.
 - i. From Cyprian’s Epistle No. 50:

1. "For although there seem to be tares in the church, yet neither our faith nor our charity ought to be hindered, so that because we see that there are tares in the church we ourselves should withdraw from the church: we ought only to labor that we may be wheat, that when the wheat shall begin to be gathered into the Lord's barns, we may receive fruit for our labor and work.
 2. "The apostle in his epistle says, 'In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth, and some to honor and some to dishonor.' (**2 Timothy 2:20**) Let us strive, dearest brethren, and labor as much as we possibly can, that we may be vessels of gold or silver. But to the Lord alone it is granted to break the vessels of earth, to whom also is given the rod of iron. The servant cannot be greater than his lord, nor may any one claim to himself what the Father has given to the Son alone, so as to think that he can take the fan for winnowing and purging the threshing floor (**Matthew 3:12, Luke 3:17**), or can separate by human judgment all the tares from the wheat (**Matthew 13:28-30**). That is a proud obstinacy and a sacrilegious presumption which a depraved madness assumes to itself."
 3. (Source: Cyprian, *The Epistles of Cyprian, Epistle No. 50*, section 3; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 327)
- ii. From Cyprian's Epistle No. 51:
1. "Then, moreover, what a swelling of arrogance it is, what oblivion of humility and gentleness, what a boasting of his own arrogance, that any one should either dare, or think that he is able, to do what the Lord did not even grant to the apostles; that he should think that he can discern the tares from the wheat, or, as if it were granted to him to bear the fan and to purge the threshing floor, should endeavor to separate the chaff from the wheat; and since the apostle says, 'But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth,' should think to choose the vessels of gold and of silver, to despise, to cast away, and to condemn the vessels of wood and of clay; while the vessels of wood are not burnt up except in the day of the Lord by the flame of the divine burning, and the vessels of clay are only broken by Him to whom is given the rod of iron."
 2. (Source: Cyprian, *The Epistles of Cyprian, Epistle No. 51*, section 25; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 334)
- f. So, the church will contain some wicked people in it: tares, bad fish, vessels of dishonore, etc. This should not surprise us nor hurt our faith when we meet these people!

V. Point No. 3: The Righteous are Always Persecuted by Religious Hypocrites**a. Read Matthew 23:29-36.**

- i. Jesus says that the Jewish religious hypocrites were the ones who murdered the prophets.
- ii. He said it was like that throughout their history, from the time that Cain murdered his righteous brother, Abel. (**Genesis 4**)
- iii. Jesus said that he would send them prophets, wise men and scribes, and that they would kill them just as their forefathers had done.

b. Peter told the high priest and Jewish leaders and rulers:

- i. "...Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead... This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.'" (**Acts 4:10-11**, quoting from NKJV; where Peter is quoting from **Psalms 118**, designated **Psalms 117** in the LXX)
- c. In **Acts 7**, Stephen, in his speech to the Sanhedrin, makes the point that their forefathers always rejected God's servants. They rejected Joseph, Moses, the prophets, and now they just rejected and murdered the Christ, the Messiah.
 - i. "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers...." (**Acts 7:52**, NKJV)
- d. This is the ancient pattern: the righteous are persecuted by religious hypocrites. Therefore, we should not be surprised when we see similar things happening today to us. or to others who are striving to live righteous lives!

VI. Point No. 4: Just as There Were False Prophets and Bad Leaders in the Past, There Will Be More in the Future

- a. The New Testament is full of warnings that bad teachers and leaders will come into the church.
- b. Jesus Himself warned:
 - i. "Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved." (**Matthew 24:11-13**, NKJV)
 - ii. Read **Matthew 24:43-51**.

1. This teaching is the foundation for the three parables that follow in **Matthew 25** (Ten Virgins, Talents, and Sheep & Goats), all of which speak of what we must do to be prepared for the Second Coming of Jesus and the Day of Judgment.
2. Those servants left in charge of the household until the Master returns are supposed to be taking care of their fellow servants, giving them food in their due season.
3. However, the evil fellow servant does two things in the delay of the master's return.
 - a. He treats his fellow servants abusively.
 - b. He becomes morally lax and gives himself over to sins of the flesh, in this case, gluttony and drunkenness.
4. This provides a heads-up for two groups of Christians, it seems to me.
 - a. Christian leaders (teachers, preachers, shepherds, parents, etc.) need to beware.
 - i. They should look at others put under their care and oversight as fellow servants, and not lord it over them or think they are better than the others.
 - b. Christian followers (the rest of us) should not be surprised when we see leaders treating us abusively or leading hypocritical lives of sinful indulgence.
 - i. Jesus warned it would happen.
 - ii. There will be evil fellow servants.
 - iii. Jesus will take care of these people upon His return and see that they get the punishment they deserve. Rest assured: *no one gets away with anything*, in the end!
 - c. In fact, we should take comfort in Jesus' warnings, knowing that He will take care of punishing the wicked (we do not have to).
- c. The apostles and other New Testament writers also warn a great deal about false teachers and corrupt leaders who will come into the church.
 - i. The apostle Peter
 1. Read **2 Peter 2:1-3 & 2:12-22**.

- a. The primary focus of this letter is warnings about false teachers and wicked people who will come into the church.
 - b. They are filled with greed, adultery, and depravity.
 - c. They seduce others.
 - d. They are like Balaam, a prophet described in **Numbers**. He uttered wonderful prophecies, but ended up being consumed by his greed and led Israel into immorality and idolatry.
 - i. He was a complex character who alternately appears to be good/wicked/good/wicked in the account given in **Numbers**.
 - ii. Let us not be surprised when we encounter church leaders like Balaam, with a mixture of good and evil, who ultimately lead God's people astray.
 - e. The passage speaks of those who are like pigs who are washed but go back to wallowing in the mud, who escape the pollution of the world but return to it.
 - i. Sometimes people wonder, when they find wicked people in the church, whether these people were wicked from the beginning (never truly became Christians), or if they were true Christians who went bad.
 - ii. In this letter, Peter makes it clear that at least some of the wicked people who will be found in the church would be people who truly did become Christians, but later returned to their old sinful ways.
- ii. Jude

1. Read **Jude v. 3-4, v. 11-13**

- a. The main focus of this short letter is warnings regarding evil people coming into the church.
 - i. From the opening of this letter: "...I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. *For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (**Jude 3-4**, NKJV)
- b. Here also, Jude speaks of false prophets and corrupt people who will come into the church as being *like Balaam*.

iii. The apostle Paul

1. As discussed earlier, **2 Timothy** is largely devoted to warning Timothy about bad people who will come into the church in the future.
2. From Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears." (**Acts 20:29-31**, NKJV)

d. The attitude of many churches is: "But that won't happen *here*."

- i. Most church leaders think that corruption takes place (and false teachers arise) in the churches down the street, the *other* churches (not *their own* church).
- ii. This was not Paul's attitude! Paul was concerned about the church he had started, warning that false teachers would rise up.
- iii. It is very easy to look down on other churches plagued by scandals or false teachers.
 1. Roman Catholic church sex scandals (homosexual abuse, some involving children; coverups; financial abuse)
 2. Southern Baptist – recent documentation of widespread sexual immorality among leaders
 3. Ravi Zecharias – worldwide apologetics ministry
 4. There are many churches today, of all different denominations, drifting into all kinds of false teaching.
- iv. Yet how many churches have the attitude of Paul: warning their members that "It *will* happen *HERE*; beware!"
- v. **Question:** Do we think we can lay a better foundation than Paul did after three years?
 1. Paul did a great job laying a spiritual foundation for the church in Ephesus. However, he was *aware of what Satan would* do over time!
 2. Paul was not able to build a 'bullet-proof' church, which Satan would be unable to infiltrate.

3. Let us never forget that. Let us have the same wisdom and humility that Paul had.

VII. Point No. 6: Heroes to Inspire Us

- a. I need heroes to look up to, examples to imitate when I am facing challenges. Fortunately, there are many in the Scriptures.
- b. Joseph (**Genesis 37-50**)
 - i. If you think you have been treated badly by others who were in the kingdom of God, I encourage you to compare the list of abuses you suffered against those faced by Joseph!
 1. Yet he had done *nothing wrong*.
 2. He was hated for exposing the sins of his unrighteous brothers.
 3. He was hated for recounting dreams that God had given him.
 4. His brothers hated him and plotted to murder him, but sold him into slavery instead for money.
 5. Later they lied to their father about it, fabricating a false story of how he had been killed by a wild animal.
 - iii. He was isolated from his own people after being sold into slavery, yet resisted sexual temptation and spent over two years in prison although innocent.
 1. Yet he never became bitter.
 - iv. After his father dies, his brothers lie to him and fabricate a story about their father's deathbed wish that Joseph forgive his brothers.
 - v. Read **Genesis 50:15-21**. There are several important lessons for us, including:
 1. Joseph acknowledged the wickedness of his brothers.
 - a. He did not pretend or try to convince himself that they were good guys. He looked at them realistically and saw them as they were: wicked!

2. However, he also saw the hand of God in using what they did to bring about something wonderful: the saving of thousands of lives.
3. Joseph did not wallow in self-pity and dive into sin. He maintained his personal righteousness.
4. Joseph was not bitter; he comforted his brothers and took care of them.
5. He was willing to forgive them for the evil things they did.
 - a. **Question:** How do the things that were done to you by those claiming to be in the kingdom of God compare with the things done to Joseph?
 - i. Did anyone conspire to murder you?
 - ii. Did they sell you into slavery and then cover up their crime by claiming you were killed by a wild animal?
 - b. **Question:** How does your heart compare to that of Joseph?
 - i. Do you blame God for what happened to you?
 - ii. Are you unwilling to forgive others for the sins they committed against you?
 - iii. Do you feel sorry for yourself and therefore justified to sin (immorality, pornography, laziness, drunkenness, gossip, slander, etc.)?
 - c. Consider the example of David, under abusive treatment at the hands of King Saul. (**1 Samuel**)
 - i. He was treated abusively but did not seek revenge when he had the opportunity.
 - ii. He was described as “a man after God’s own heart”. (**1 Samuel 13:14**)
 - iii. Ultimately, after a long period of time, he was raised to the throne.
 - d. Consider the example of Jacob under his deceitful uncle Laban (**Genesis 24-31**)
 - i. Laban was a master deceiver.
 1. He switched the two sisters on Jacob’s wedding night.
 2. He made Jacob serve for $7 + 7 = 14$ years for the two sisters.
 3. He kept changing the wages offered to Jacob from the flock.

- ii. Yet Jacob saw that God *had been with him throughout his trials*, and that God had delivered him. (Read **Genesis 31:38-42.**)
- e. Stephen being stoned (**Acts 7:54-60**)
 - i. He has a merciful spirit toward those who persecuted and killed him.
 - ii. His dying prayer: “Lord, do not charge them with this sin.” (**Acts 7:60**)
- f. Also, consider other heroes of faith who faced severe persecution throughout the Scriptures, such as Daniel and his three friends.

VIII. Point No. 7: Sins to Avoid

- a. Let us not do Satan’s work. Don’t let Satan gain *two* victories (his first being getting leaders in the church to sin against us, *and his second being getting us to sin in response*).
- b. Bitterness
 - i. Avoid the trap of becoming bitter over what you have been through.
 - 1. Read **Hebrews 12:11-15.**
 - 2. “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; *lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble*, and by this many become defiled;” (**Hebrews 12:14-15, NKJV**)
- c. Gossip and Slander
 - i. Beware sins of the tongue, which are a special challenge for Christians who have been hurt by others.
 - 1. Read **James 3:5-12.**
 - a. We cannot give in to gossip or slander when we are wronged by others.
 - b. The tongue has great power to do evil; it is compared to a fire that can burn down a forest!
 - c. Often when people suffer at the hands of church leaders, they want to talk about it with others. While we may need to seek help and counsel, may we never give in to slander, gossip, or retaliation.
 - 2. Read **1 Peter 2:12-23** and **3:8-14.**

- a. Jesus left us an example to follow.
 - i. When He suffered, he did not revile in return or threaten, but committed Himself to the Father who judges righteously.
 - ii. He did not allow his tongue to speak evil.
 - iii. He turned away from evil and did good.
 - iv. He suffered for righteousness' sake.
- d. Unforgiveness
 - i. If we are not willing to forgive others for what they have done to us, God will not forgive us.
 - 1. Consider what Jesus taught regarding the unmerciful servant, who had been forgiven a great debt but who was unwilling to forgive a smaller debt another servant owed to him. (**Matthew 18:21-35**)
 - ii. In the Lord's prayer, Jesus said we should pray to the Father daily:
 - 1. "...And forgive us our debts, *as we forgive our debtors.*" (**Matthew 6:12**, NKJV)
 - 2. "...And forgive us our sins, *for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us...*" (**Luke 11:4**, NKJV)
- e. Vengeance belongs to God, not to us
 - i. "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.'" (**Romans 12:19-20**, NKJV)

IX. Some Things that Have Helped Me, Personally

- a. Have a faith built on the original, unshakeable foundation.
 - i. My faith is built on the foundation that Jesus died on the cross for our sins, and was raised from the dead, in fulfillment of the prophecies and as testified to by eyewitnesses. (**1 Corinthians 15:1-4**)
 - 1. Either it happened or it did not.
 - 2. My faith in Jesus has *nothing to do with how I am being treated by others* who call themselves by the name 'Christian'.

- b. A 'mental picture' I kept during bleak times in the church:
 - i. Alien enemies had temporarily taken over the island (the church),
 - ii. However, someday they will depart or be driven out, and we will get it back!
- c. Pray about all these things, on long walks in the woods.
 - i. (I did that during times when I felt I had one to talk to, no one I could trust who could relate.)
 - ii. Cry out to God regarding things you are feeling and struggling with.
 - iii. Cast your burdens/suffering/pain on God, rather than spreading your attitudes toward others.
 - 1. "casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7, NKJV)
- d. Love the Bible and keep reading it, especially in the darkest times.
 - i. When everything around you in the church seems weird, keep your nose in the Bible. Love it and look for strength and the answers there.
 - ii. Some of the greatest passages regarding the importance of the Bible are in the context of explaining how to stand faithful when false teachers and corrupt leaders infiltrate the church.
 - 1. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (**2 Timothy 3:16**)
 - 2. "And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you so well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place...." (**2 Peter 1:19**)
 - 3. "contend for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints" (**Jude v.3**)
 - iii. Just as we need a healthy immune system to fight off physical diseases, we need a healthy spiritual diet of the word of God daily if we are to fight off the spiritual diseases that are rampant in this world.

X. For Further Reading on This Topic

- a. One book I recommend for Christians who are struggling with past abuses at the hands of other Christians is:
 - i. *Letters to a Devastated Christian*, by Gene Edwards.

- ii. This is a short but challenging book, and I thought some of the points in it were excellent.