



Standing FIRM

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO HOSTILITY
AND PERSECUTION

Jesse Yow

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS



Published by Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118-3968
1-800-325-3040 • www.cph.org

Copyright © 2015 Jesse Yow

This downloadable resource is provided free of charge as a supplement to the publication *Standing Firm: A Christian Response to Hostility and Persecution*. Other than downloading this resource for personal, Bible study, classroom, or congregational use, other usage is prohibited. No part of this material may be transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible® (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction for Leaders

This Bible study is a companion to *Standing Firm: A Christian Response to Hostility and Persecution* (CPH, 2015). Created in the form of discussion questions and augmented with information for the study leader, the material is flexible enough to adapt according to the needs and interests of the study group and according to the teaching style of the leader. This material can also be used by an individual to review and consider how personally to respond to hostility or persecution.

Because this is a lot of material to cover in a limited series of group or class meetings, the class leader should choose and use material according to the level of detail desired. Some parts of it will generate more discussion than others, so you will need to decide how much time you want to allow for discussing current events and trends versus focusing on the biblical material and how it applies to our life in Christ. To do justice to the topics you will need a mix of both, but focus will be lost if the group strays too far into politics or abstract discussions rather than getting down to cases. The “Ground Rules for Discussion” provided below can help you manage the time. Speaking of time, each topic in the outline can easily take one, two, or even several hours of discussion if your group really engages in the topic. Bottom line: plan ahead and adapt the level of detail and the focus to fit into the time available for your study.

Note that a student section with questions only is found at the end of this document on p. 36.

OUTLINE OF DISCUSSION TOPICS

Introduction

1. What’s the Situation?
 - Situation Analysis
2. Theological Understanding of Hostility
 - Examples from the Old Testament
 - Examples from the New Testament
 - Recap, and Our Path Forward
3. Theological Basis for Christian Response
 - God Works through Us
 - God Uses Our Circumstances
 - God Provides Resources
 - Response Rooted in the Gospel
4. Christian Response
 - Responding with Spiritual Disciplines
5. Christian Response
 - Options for Action
6. Gospel-Based Guidance

GROUND RULES FOR DISCUSSION

- This is a complex topic, so please approach it with an open mind.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- Constructive critical thinking is an asset; shun cynicism.
- Respect other opinions; give others a turn in the discussion.
- Stay out of politics; this is a lot bigger.
- Be wary of sensationalized or sanitized news.
- God's Word is more authoritative than any other source of information.

INTRODUCTION

1. Read Matthew 5:39–41 and identify its context. Then discuss the questions that prompted the writing of this book:
 - When facing hostility or persecution, what can we do besides turn the other cheek?
 - How do we know if we are facing hostility or if someone is just having a bad day? How might this affect the way we respond?
 - When does hostility shade into persecution? What if we aren't sure it is persecution?
 - What does God expect of us, and how might He like to use us in bad situations?

These introductory questions are best used to spark thoughtful discussion, assess levels of interest, screen for points of particular concern or misunderstanding, and set the stage for our study. Use this as an introduction for discussing the topic without straying off into politics or other tangential issues. Our study will examine answers to these questions and more, with a goal of preparing us for encountering hostility, oppression, and persecution. Without dwelling too much on current news or delving into matters of politics or policy, we will try to examine the kinds of hostility Christians face, the underlying theological roots of that hostility, a theological basis for responding, and our options for response.

2. Read the following Bible passages and discuss the context and type of challenge being addressed in each case.
 - Mark 13:9
 - 1 Corinthians 16:13–16
 - Galatians 5:1
 - Ephesians 6:10–13

Responding to hostility will almost certainly involve taking a stand. We may not be looking for trouble, but if we don't run into hostility, it will probably find us sooner or later anyway.

3. When you read the passages in number 2 above, do they strike you as warnings or as assurances? Can we stand firm on our own? If not, then upon whose strength do we stand?

Attempting to be a Lone Ranger Christian—trying to stand firm all on our own—is a mistake. In fact, when we try to do everything on our own, we start to risk living a life of works-righteousness rather than leaning on our Lord, which means a failed life. Our response to hostility becomes a matter of character and faith, but at some point it may also involve our personal welfare as well as that of our friends and neighbors.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S THE SITUATION?

SITUATION ANALYSIS

1. Before responding to a hostile situation, we should pause for a reality check. Think about a situation in which you felt as if you have faced hostility, or a situation you heard about on the news. Then ponder the following questions.
 - Reality check #1: Are we encountering hostility, or is this just a disagreement over competing ideas? In other words, do we have opponents who are trying to shut us down, or is this an opportunity for us to share God's truth in the face of competing ideas and values?
 - Reality check #2: Have we broken a law or done something that would deserve punishment? In other words, is this hostility, or are we being punished justly?

Start with a personal reality check to be sure of where you stand. We can rationalize a lot of our own behavior, so we need to be brutally honest to discern what is happening. If this is hostility that might lead to something worse (oppression or persecution), then we need to start thinking about our strategy to respond. If this is just a disagreement that leads to an intense conversation, then maybe we have an opportunity to put what we believe into play in hopes of sharing the Gospel. On the other hand, if we have broken the law or violated someone's rights (*trespassed*, as the Lord's Prayer puts it), then we need to take our punishment, perhaps make restitution, and submit to secular law for the sake of Christ.

2. Read 1 Peter 4:14–16 and explain the difference between the two types of suffering discussed in this passage. Give examples of each kind of suffering.

Peter contrasts fair punishment (suffering) for immoral or criminal behavior with unjust punishment for moral, honest behavior. The first case happens more often than people realize; for example, nearly every adult can identify with being caught violating the speed limit. But Peter points out that “suffering the effects of our own sin is not bearing the cross” (*The Lutheran Study Bible* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2009], 2157).

3. Read Romans 13:1–4. What is the government's responsibility if we do something wrong? Under what circumstances might we have to choose between obeying God and obeying government? What would you do if your government overstepped its authority and asked you to do something that is clearly against the will of God?

Examples from current events might include restrictions on free speech imposed on behalf of favored political or social groups.

4. In general, people might respond to Christians or the Gospel in any of several different ways. Have you seen people offer these responses? How so?
 - Apathy: indifference to Christianity [We see a lot of apathy in the United States.]

- Disagreement: an honest difference of views, which might be an opportunity for confessing our faith rather than a hostile situation per se [This could turn into an opportunity to discuss different worldviews or even to share the Gospel.]
- Hostility: negative behavior expressed in written or spoken words against Christianity [Hostility seems to be increasing in the U.S. and Europe, but it would be worth discussing to see if the group agrees.]
- Opposition: attempts to eliminate the Christian message of the Gospel [Note that this goes well beyond the concept of competing ideas, beliefs, or worldviews and instead attempts to cut off any comparison of ideas by banning the Gospel from discussion.]
- Persecution: attempts to eliminate the Christian message and block or eliminate Christians [This goes even further by attempting to get rid of Christians as well as God's Law and Gospel.]

Try to identify at least one example from current or recent news accounts for each of these kinds of behavior. We may find these different kinds of responses coming from individual people or from entire groups, communities, or nations. This will involve a certain amount of judgment by the group. Some people may want to deny the reality of hostility or downplay the reality of persecution, in which case it might be worth exploring why they feel this way and whether their feelings change the reality of what is happening. We cannot wish hostility away by denying that it is real or by invoking the cliché that “there are two sides to every story.” On the other hand, some news accounts of persecution are overstated in their reports of events or their explanations of underlying motives. Regardless, if we feel that we are experiencing hostility because of our faith, there is little value in quibbling over whether it really is hostility or whether it really is because of our faith. Instead, we should seek to understand the situation and to understand God's will for how we respond.

5. In reality, how people treat Christians is both simpler and more complicated than the above responses; it can change with time and can differ depending on how we respond.
 - Which kinds of responses might be prompted by our identity in Christ?
 - Which kinds of responses do we see today, and where? Give examples.
 - Do you think the way Christians are treated in your country is becoming better or worse? Why?

Discuss personal examples in the group, and consider referring them to current and recent news reports. Help the group see that some opposition is related to our identity in Christ (discussed further below) while other opposition might be triggered by other factors. Opponents and persecutors might think they know why they treat Christians the way they do, but there may likely be other factors in play that they do not realize. For example, if they seem to hate Christians for some reason, could it be that they are afraid of Christians without realizing it?

At this point, introduce world maps of persecution that you can find online from some of the Christian organizations mentioned in *Standing Firm* (pp. 36–39). Compare maps, if you have more than one available, and discuss why different organizations might have different views of which countries oppress Christians. Point out that some persecuting countries are primarily Muslim, some are Hindu, and some are Communist, but others might turn up on the map yet

not fit into these three main categories. As time allows, discuss why Muslims, Hindus, and totalitarian governments might have problems with Christians and their beliefs. The common thread seems to be that each one demands a degree of loyalty, deference, or submission that Christians normally reserve for our Lord Jesus Christ, and complying with their demands would violate the First Commandment.

6. According to John 15:18–20, what kind of treatment should we expect, and why? What does this suggest about how we should understand our situation?
7. Read John 10:14–18. Jesus knew He would die for us, yet He set aside His glory and did it anyway. Why? If we are Christians, or “little Christs,” what does this mean for us as we seek to follow Him?

Encourage people to focus on the “why” part of questions 6 and 7. This might sound strange, but we should not take mistreatment or hatred personally because it is not about us—it is about Christ. Being a Christian is not just a label, it means that Christ lives in us, and people can often see this even if they might not fully realize or understand what they see. We need to drill down further, though. We might think about how God is remaking us to become more Christlike (e.g., think about the fruits of the Spirit) as we hear His Word and partake of the Sacrament. However, if God sent Christ to do His work as described in John 3:16, and if we are Christians or “little Christs,” then we should expect Him to use us to accomplish His work. This is not a salvation by works, nor is it something we dream up on our own initiative; it is more like God using the apostles, Timothy, Apollos, Priscilla, Aquila, Barnabas, Luther, Melancthon, and other Christians to accomplish His goals down through the ages, even if they did not always feel like or even know moment to moment that He was using them as His instrument. Likewise, He uses Christians today to accomplish His will even if we don’t always feel, see, or understand at the moment. Since we are “little Christs” (or Christians), we should expect to receive treatment similar to what Jesus received. God sacrificed Jesus to extend His grace and Gospel to the world, so would He not also lovingly sacrifice each of us for the sake of reaching the lost?

8. Genuine hostility, opposition, and persecution exist worldwide.
 - List examples from the United States, Canada, and Europe.
 - List examples from Muslim, Hindu, and Communist countries.
 - These situations (and our situation) can change quickly, so how can we stay abreast of developments?

People usually tend to think in abstract terms or of local situations, and they may not be aware of trends in the U.S. and Europe or be aware of the persecution Christians experience in many of the Muslim, Hindu, and Communist countries around the world. New instances of persecution come up every week, but they may not be reported very well in the U.S. You can use this part of the question to help the group think outside of themselves and perhaps identify with persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries, but you may need to bring one or two examples from recent news reports to help spark the discussion.

9. Do you think there are spiritual reasons for hostility toward Christians, or are people just in the wrong place at the wrong time? Recalling that God is sovereign and uses His people in difficult situations, how might God use those who flee persecution and those who stay behind?

Sometimes there are obvious reasons for hostility, but sometimes it looks like people are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, God is never caught by surprise, so even if the situation seems way out of control, we can rest assured that God has it in hand. He has reasons and plans to use even bad situations for His purposes, and this reassures us even if we cannot see the whole picture. God is sovereign, and He may choose to use His people in extremely difficult situations yet in different ways. We need to understand, then, that what we choose to do or not do in a hostile situation may have implications for how the Gospel is confessed, shared, and received.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HOSTILITY

1. We can find evidence in the Bible for three related roots of hostility:

- Original sin, and sin in general
- Opposition to God, and particularly to Jesus Christ
- Spiritual warfare waged by forces of evil

We can usually trace the source of hostility toward Christians back to one or more of these three roots, but like the roots of a tree, the roots of hostility can be hard to see and may be tangled and intertwined. Regardless, they reflect the fallen nature of humanity and the world in which we live. Who offers a remedy for these problems?

News reports carry stories about hostility and persecution, but they may not mention any spiritual aspect of the conflicts, or they may misrepresent it. God's Word has a lot to say about human behavior, and it is worth understanding the theological roots of hostility so that we can better understand the challenges we face.

2. Looking first at original sin, read Genesis 3:1–7 with special attention to verse 5. What did Adam and Eve think they would gain by disobeying God?

Next, read Romans 5:12–19. What impact did Adam's original sin have on the human race? What happens when our human lust for sovereignty and self-interest runs into God's sovereignty and interests?

So what did Adam and Eve want? The fruit looked good to eat, and the serpent was certainly persuasive, but the real selling point that trapped Adam and Eve was the (false) idea that they could be like God if they ate the fruit. This is the fundamental nature of original sin: the idea that I can be my own god instead of submitting to the only real God. Adam's sin has infected every human being born since, except for Jesus who was both human and divine. When people's lust for sovereignty and self-interest runs into God, they have to realize that they are not God. They may be in denial about this and might become quite angry and bitter at not being in charge. Jealousy of those who live in peace under God's grace, along with ongoing attempts at rebellion, is a big source of hostility toward God's people.

3. Read Romans 1:18–32, which summarizes the corrosive and destructive power of sin. What does it take to rescue us from this downward spiral?

The phrase "God gave them up" shows up three times in the Romans passage, showing that God may choose to punish the rebellious—those who relish their sin—by letting them go their own way. Eventually their own way becomes a form of hell, as they exist apart from God and apart from everything good. Every one of us has a streak of rebellion in our spiritual DNA, and nobody escapes on their own. This is why Jesus came as the second Adam, to set things right for those who believe.

4. Turning next to the world's opposition to God, read John 15:18–25. Why do people hate Jesus, and how does this relate to original sin?

Jesus warned His disciples that the world (i.e., people in general) already hated Him and that they would hate the disciples because of Him. Even though they might not have realized it, people hated (and still hate) Christ because of their sinfulness and rebellion against God.

5. For an example of this opposition in action, read Acts 9:1–5. What did Saul think he was doing, and what did Jesus reveal about the true nature of Saul's behavior?

Jesus revealed to Saul that though he thought he was persecuting the Church, he actually was persecuting Christ.

6. We encounter hostility because our opponents identify us with Christ. Read the following passages. What do they say about how we are linked to Jesus?

- John 1:12
- Luke 8:21
- 1 Corinthians 12:27
- Ephesians 5:31–32

We identify with Christ in several ways beyond simply being called by His name:

John 1:12—What closer linkage could we have than to be a child of God?

Luke 8:21—This implies that we are Jesus' siblings, and Romans 8:29 reinforces this idea by referring to us as His brothers.

1 Corinthians 12:27—Going beyond family ties, we are known as the Body of Christ.

Ephesians 5:31–32—This is more difficult to understand than the idea of being the Body of Christ, but the Church is also the Bride of Christ.

7. Given our close ties to Jesus and our citizenship in God's kingdom, are God's people ever fully assimilated into this world? Why or why not?

Our identity with Christ puts us at risk for hostility or persecution as long as we live here on earth, just as Jesus was an object of hostility and persecution during His time here. In effect, we are citizens of heaven but living in hostile territory!

8. Finally, looking to spiritual warfare as a root of hostility, read Ephesians 6:10–12. According to this passage, who is under attack, and by whom? How might this affect our situations?

Most spiritual warfare seems to be invisible to us, so these are hard questions to answer. Nevertheless, we know that the evil one and his allies are hostile toward God and therefore hostile toward us. It stands to reason that sometimes we are in the line of fire and at other times we suffer collateral damage. Hopefully we do not have to experience "friendly fire," but this might in fact happen if well-meaning Christians do not understand the issues or if a situation inadvertently attacks us.

9. Spiritual conflict is often hidden from our view, but we catch glimpses of it in several passages of Scripture:

- 1 Chronicles 21:1
- Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6
- Daniel 10:12–14
- Luke 22:31–34
- 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

With these examples in mind, how might the evil one attack us? What comfort do we find in 1 Peter 5:8–10?

1 Chronicles 21:1—Satan provoked David to sin and to lead Israel into sin—the numbering implied a desire to rely on their own strength rather than on God.

Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6—Satan received permission twice to test Job almost to the point of death.

Daniel 10:12–14—The angel assigned to see Daniel was stopped for several days by an unseen demonic power.

Luke 22:31–34—Satan received permission to test Peter, but even though Peter could not yet understand, Jesus had already prayed for his spiritual survival.

2 Corinthians 12:7–10—Satan also tested Paul on an ongoing basis, using a thorn in the flesh that God chose not to remedy.

How might the evil one attack us? This is worth some brainstorming. Answers might include illness, loneliness, depression, anxiety, division of the fellowship, or other kinds of setbacks. Note that many of these have medical equivalents, and this is not meant to say that something such as depression is always a spiritual attack. If the group feels secure enough, you might want to ask if any of them have experienced such attacks. Overall, 1 Peter 5:8–10 reminds us that even though the evil one might attack us, we can withstand the attack with God's help. This is part of standing firm.

EXAMPLES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

10. Elijah—Isolated and Alone

- Skim 1 Kings 18:20–19:18 and outline the sequence of events. Who opposed Elijah, and why? How would this relate to the roots of hostility we have already identified?
- How did God use Elijah's situation, and what did He do for Elijah?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this look like today?

The prophets of Baal, Baal's worshipers, and Ahaz and Jezebel (king and queen of Israel) were Elijah's visible opponents, but there was probably a spiritual warfare aspect too. This led to Jezebel's curse and threat on Elijah's life after his triumph over the prophets of Baal.

Elijah responded to Jezebel's threat by running for his life without waiting for God's instructions. God sent an angel to meet him along the way and provided water and food to sustain him. Once Elijah arrived at Mount Horeb, God took time to meet with him, reassure him,

and give him new assignments. This suggests that rest, food, encouragement, and work are all important therapies for those under attack.

One gets the sense that God was guiding Elijah gently but firmly, though the panicky run from Jezebel's threat was probably Elijah's own idea.

11. Daniel—Persecuted for Prayer

- Read Daniel 6:4–13. Who opposed Daniel, and why? How would this relate to the roots of hostility we have already identified?
- How did Daniel respond to the opposition? Do you think he was following God's guidance or acting on his own? If the latter, what do you make of his motives?
- How did God rescue Daniel, and what did the king learn from this outcome?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this look like today?
- Read Daniel 1:17 and 9:1–3. How well did Daniel know God, and where had Daniel learned about God? How would this understanding guide his choice of actions when threatened?

Daniel rose through the ranks to become one of the top three rulers in Babylon, but his competitors were jealous and wanted to get rid of him. They may have resented the strength of his faith too. Attacking Daniel through his prayer life was a convenient point of approach.

Daniel's knowledge of God and of the Scriptures probably influenced his decision to fight the ban on praying to God, and they set an example for us. The group may want to speculate about Daniel's motives in praying publicly rather than privately, but the main point is that he responded by praying to God rather than backing down. Once he survived the lions' den, it was unclear how much the king actually understood about the God of Israel, but it is clear that he was impressed with Daniel's faith and integrity. This probably led to additional opportunities for Daniel to confess his faith at the highest levels of Babylonian government. When thinking of possible examples today, ask the group if any of them have been forbidden from praying or worshipping, and why.

12. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—Pushed over the Brink

- Read Daniel 3:8–18. What kind of trouble did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego encounter, and why? How would this relate to the roots of hostility?
- How did they respond to the king's edict, and what were they prepared to do if things did not turn out their way? What could motivate them to take such a stand?
- How did God rescue Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and what did the king learn from this outcome?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this kind of challenge look like today?

These three men were not as highly placed in Babylon as Daniel, but they were high enough in management to be targets for political enemies. Although God does not seem to have told them personally what to do, they were surely familiar with the Ten Commandments, and the First Commandment explicitly forbids worshiping any kind of idol. With that knowledge in hand, they knew not to bow to the golden image but had no way of knowing how taking a stand would turn out.

After the three men confessed their faith in God before the king, God chose to save them from the fire in a very visible way. Even the king was able to see divine intervention firsthand, as he saw a fourth person walking around in the fire with them. Once they came out of the furnace, the king had to recognize the superiority of their God.

In applying this example, ask the group if we are ever asked to bow down to something other than the one true God. If so, what might we be asked to bow to and how should we respond? You might want to ask if we ever do this to ourselves, in terms of slipping into deference to something or someone besides God.

13. Ezra and Nehemiah—Hostility at Work

- Skim over Ezra 4:1–6 and 4:24–5:5 and then skim through Nehemiah 2:17–19; 4:1–3; and 6:10–14. Note that Ezra and Nehemiah were leading groups of Jews back to Jerusalem after roughly seventy years of exile in Babylon.
- What kinds of opposition do these accounts relate as the Jews began to rebuild the temple and city wall in Jerusalem, and what kinds of motives were behind it? How would this relate either directly or indirectly to the roots of hostility?
- How did Ezra and Nehemiah respond, and how did they know to stay the course rather than compromise?
- How did God use the situation to encourage and re-establish His people?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this kind of opposition look like today?

Ezra was priest and Nehemiah was governor, so they each had different work to do and somewhat different problems to solve upon leading the people from Babylon back to Jerusalem. Note that the people the Jews found around Jerusalem were not native Judeans but had been settled there from some other part of the Assyrian Empire, so they had no true knowledge of God and probably assumed that He was just a local deity. Whether for religious reasons, jealousy, or other kinds of rivalry, these people were not pleased to see the Jews return from Babylon or to see them lay claim to their historic lands.

Ezra and Nehemiah were both shrewd, able leaders who knew how to deal with opposition, when to ignore it, and how to lead their people to accomplish their work. They each had a pragmatic faith in God that assured them of the success of His work, so they did what they could to move the work forward rather than testing God by waiting. Even though the local peoples could, early on, have mounted an attack against the Jews, they did not. Perhaps God held them in check without them even realizing it. And it appears that God was restoring His people to Jerusalem as a continuation of educating the surrounding nations about His power and sovereignty.

Last but not least, these successes would strengthen and encourage the Jews who resettled Jerusalem. In a similar vein, we might encounter many kinds of well-intentioned (or not so kind) interference with our confession of faith or with our religious freedom and practices. If so, then we need to discern the interference and its motives for what they are and seek God's guidance and help for what to do about it.

EXAMPLES FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT

14. Peter and John—On Trial for the Gospel

- Read Acts 4:1–22. Who opposed Peter and John, and why? Where might Christians run into similar kinds of opposition today? Give examples from recent events, if possible.
- How did Peter and John respond to this opposition by words and deeds? Why would they respond in this way rather than submitting?
- Read Acts 4:23–31. How did the Church view the opposition that had arisen? Identify how they responded. Why do you suppose they would take this approach?
- What can we learn from this sequence of developments, and what might this kind of situation look like today?

Peter and John were stopped by the religious leaders of the day because of opposition to preaching and teaching in the name of Jesus Christ. Interestingly, Roman authorities are not mentioned, so the opposition must have been religious rather than secular. The opposition included most, but perhaps not all, of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. We say most because a few of them might have become Christians in secret. The Jewish Council opposed Peter and John's witness because they thought it was drawing people away from God, when in fact it was bringing people *to* God through Jesus Christ.

Peter and John submitted to the authorities as they were arrested and brought to trial, but when given the opportunity, they defended what they were doing in the name of Christ rather than defending themselves in a personal sense—this distinction is worth exploring. At the end, Peter put the question back into the laps of the religious leaders by asking rhetorically whether it would be better to obey human rulings or to obey God.

The Early Church took this whole situation very seriously and went to the Lord in prayer. It is worth exploring what they did and did not ask of God, since they were more concerned with glorifying and serving Christ than with avoiding trouble or saving their own skins. God reaffirmed their ministry by making it fruitful and by providing miracles to show His support and endorsement. This would have been an encouragement to the Church, giving them the excitement of knowing that they were in the mainstream of serving God and bearing fruit for His kingdom. What might this look like today? Give the class a few moments to identify and discuss instances in which authorities have tried to stop people from speaking God's Word or have tried to stop their ministry if it referenced Jesus Christ. Some of the examples footnoted in the book might be good to discuss if people cannot think of recent or personal examples to share.

15. Stephen—Martyred for the Faith

- Skim through Acts 6:8–8:1 and outline the sequence of events. What kind of trouble did Stephen encounter, and what do you think was behind the opposition? How would this relate to the roots of hostility we have already discussed?
- Why didn't Stephen use his speech as an opportunity to defend himself rather than explaining and defending the Gospel? How would you describe his motives, since he did not seem interested in saving himself from martyrdom?

- Why do you think Stephen’s audience covered their ears? What does this tell us about their willingness to hear about God?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this kind of situation look like today? Give examples, if possible.

Be prepared to outline the sequence of events, starting with Stephen’s service as a deacon in the Early Church and ending with his death as a martyr. Stephen’s trial was similar to that of Jesus, including trumped-up charges and false witnesses. It differed in that Stephen made an excellent defense and there was no torture involved before reaching a verdict. In both cases, though, this was sort of a kangaroo court with a predetermined outcome.

Stephen used his speech to explain and defend the Gospel rather than to defend himself. He probably knew that he could not avoid execution unless he backpedaled on the Gospel, which he would not even consider as a path to freedom. The Word of God is living and active, and the Holy Spirit apparently used Stephen’s words to speak to and convict the hearers of their sin. Even though those people refused to listen to God calling them to the Gospel through Stephen’s speech, God used the events leading up to and including Stephen’s death to set the stage for calling Saul into service. God also used this event to trigger a round of persecution that led to the first Diaspora, or dispersal, from Jerusalem, and to start the fulfillment of the Great Commission beyond Judea and “to the ends of the earth.”

Shifting to today, think of current and recent events involving people who die because of their faith in Jesus. Do any of the news reports include the final words of martyrs or how people respond to them? What about cases in which people lose their jobs or their families because of the faith?

16. Paul—Opposed, Arrested, and Tried

- Read 2 Corinthians 11:24–27 for a quick summary of the kinds of opposition and persecution that Paul encountered in the course of his ministry.
- Read Acts 16:19–24; 17:32; and 18:5–6, 12–13 for three specific instances of opposition to Paul. What kinds of opposition did Paul encounter, and what seems to have motivated the opposition? How would this relate to the roots of hostility?
- How did God use Paul’s circumstances despite the hostility he encountered, and what kind of opportunities for sharing the Gospel did the situations generate?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this look like today? Give examples, if possible.

Ask the class to discuss what kept Paul going on his missionary journeys despite difficulties and opposition. The different kinds of opposition include beatings, jail time, ridicule, and mob behavior. Depending on the situation, sometimes Paul’s opponents were secular, sometimes they were religious, and sometimes they were mixed. Note that in each case, though, there were more Christians after the persecution than before Paul arrived.

We can see that persecution was unable to stop the Gospel, and, perhaps in some cases, Paul’s survival of persecution was a strong encouragement for the Early Church since they could see that God was in control. These situations may have also given Paul opportunities to share his faith with people whom he would not have otherwise met.

Turning to today, consider recent and current events in which Christians have been jailed because of their beliefs, such as pastors who have been imprisoned in China or in Iran. Yet word still gets out regarding their plight, and we sometimes hear that their witness results in people coming to faith in Christ, even though repressive governments or hostile news media might try to squelch that information.

RECAP, AND OUR PATH FORWARD

Genuine hostility, opposition, and persecution exist all over the world. Incomplete reporting and conflicting accounts make it difficult to understand every situation, and much persecution likely goes unreported. Nevertheless, persecution happens every week. As we take stock of the ground covered so far in this study, we need to keep two caveats in mind:

1. If we break the law, we deserve punishment. Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13–25 both make clear that if we do something illegal, we should expect punishment from the government. For example, if I deal in illegal drugs in Mexico, I should not be surprised to find myself in a Mexican jail.
2. Differing views may be opportunity in disguise. We might find ourselves discussing religious or spiritual matters in a conversation that becomes so intense that we feel threatened and sense hostility. However, we need to discern whether this is intentional or if it is simply a high-energy discussion that might lead to opportunities to confess our Christian faith.

Roots of hostility include: [Note that this is but a recap from earlier discussion, and remind the group that these roots are often hidden and intertwined, much like the roots of a tree.]

- Original sin—we each want to be God.
- Opposition to Christ—people oppose the Lordship of Christ and oppose those who bear the name of Christ.
- Spiritual warfare—unseen and often misunderstood spiritual attacks from the evil one and his agents.

Old Testament and New Testament accounts show God using bad situations for multiple purposes, so we need to ask if God might be using our situation for His purposes. With these thoughts in mind, we will move on to examine biblical foundations and options for how to deal with hostility, opposition, and persecution.

CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

1. Stop for a moment and think about how you might first react when faced with hostility or persecution.
 - Is your response likely to be physical, emotional, or spiritual (e.g., by turning to prayer or to Scripture)?
 - Is a group of Christians, such as a church, likely to respond in the same way as an individual? How might a group response be different?
 - What is wrong with asking “why me?”

How are we likely to first react when faced with hostility or persecution? Whether physical, emotional, spiritual—or all three—our response will likely be defensive unless we are prepared to respond in a proactive manner. A defensive reaction can be counterproductive. We need to be ready to act rather than react, which means preparation in advance so that we can be deliberate and intentional rather than defensive.

Asking “why me?” puts our emphasis on self and self-interest rather than on Christ and His Gospel. We need to be aware that God might wish to use hostility to sharpen or teach us, and He might wish to use the situation to support His own plans. If the latter, then we need to realize that while He has the matter entirely in hand, we might be unable to see the results.

2. Read Psalm 139:13–16 and Ephesians 2:8–10. What does this tell us about God’s plans for us, and what does this suggest about why we are here?

Psalm 139:13–16 and Ephesians 2:8–10 tell us that God knows us from before our birth, and He has already planned out our days. It is reassuring to know that He intentionally gives us days of our life, even though we don’t have any details. The Ephesians passage reminds us that we are saved by His grace rather than our works, but it then assures us that He has planned works for us to do. To make the most of this, it is helpful to know the heart and mind of God, or simply to know His character, so that we can discern His will and His ways. This positions us to understand His strategies, goals, and motives, even if our understanding is never complete, so that we can be positive and proactive rather than reactive to opposition.

GOD WORKS THROUGH US

3. Read 2 Corinthians 5:18–20. What does it mean to serve as God’s ambassador? Whom do we represent, and to whom? What happens to an ambassador in case of war?

An ambassador provides a working relationship and communication between two countries. He works *for* the country that he represents and works *with* the country to which he is assigned. In our case, we are ambassadors of Christ, representing God’s kingdom to the world and representing Christ to those who do not know Him. An ambassador is at risk if the situation between the two countries deteriorates, but he usually has an armed guard and diplomatic immunity for protection. Unfortunately, Christians do not have the armed guard or diplomatic immunity, and the situation between God’s kingdom and the world has already deteriorated.

This puts us at risk for hostility and worse, but we persevere in our assigned roles as God's ambassadors.

4. Read 1 Peter 2:9. What does it mean to serve as God's priest? In the priesthood of believers, whom do we serve and whom do we represent? How might this role be misunderstood?

Shifting our attention from ambassador to priest, a priest serves as intermediary, representing God to people and representing people to God. A priest communicates people's concerns to God and shares God's comfort and forgiveness with the people. This points, then, to how we must share forgiveness with others. People (including priests) might sometimes assign too much or not enough authority to the priesthood. The first case means forgetting that God is the higher authority behind the priest; the second case means forgetting that God commissions the priest to serve in this role.

5. Read Acts 2:14-18. What does it mean to serve as God's prophet? What does this mean for us today?

A prophet faithfully speaks the words of God to the people. These might include words of comfort and peace, words of warning and judgment, or both. Unfortunately, it seems that God's prophets in the Old Testament were disregarded more often than not. However, they were speaking God's Word, and God is faithful to make certain that His Word never fails. Our role, then, is to remain faithful to our charge, even as the prophets were faithful to theirs.

6. Read 1 John 4:19. What motivates our work, and how is our motivation sustained in the face of opposition? How does this reflect the heart and priorities of God?

The only force strong enough to motivate us through the challenges of hostility, oppression, and persecution is the love of God. And this helps set our priorities as well as motivates us. It is His love, through the Gospel, that we share with those around us.

GOD USES OUR CIRCUMSTANCES

7. Skim over the life of Joseph (Genesis 37–50) and identify the cycles of good and bad circumstances that he encountered. Were these random events of fate, or did God have a hand in them? How did God use Joseph and these situations for His own purposes?

A quick thumbnail sketch of Joseph's life might include the dreams that he would rule over his brothers, being sold into slavery, successful management of Potiphar's household, accusations and prison because of Potiphar's wife, interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh's baker and cupbearer while in prison, and then release from prison to become Pharaoh's deputy ruler over Egypt. People might think of other examples but, as Joseph testified to his brothers after his father died (Genesis 50:20), God used Joseph's inspired management to save his family (and all of Egypt) from a seven-year famine.

8. Scan Acts 6–8 to see what happened to Stephen after the church appointed him as deacon. What ministry activities (or church work) did Stephen perform, and what events, good and bad, happened to him? How did God use Stephen for His own purposes in these circumstances?

Stephen served as one of the first deacons of the Church. He preached and taught, served in acts of mercy, and worked miraculous signs that helped validate the ministry. Unfortunately (from a worldly point of view), he caught the attention of the religious authorities and was arrested, tried, and convicted under false accusations. Enemies of the Gospel of Christ stoned him to death. Stephen's martyrdom led to the first persecution of the Church, the dispersal (or Diaspora) of Christians from Jerusalem to begin fulfilling the Great Commission outside of Judea, and indirectly to the calling and conversion of Saul.

9. What does Philippians 3:7–14 say about personal priorities, and how should this inform our attitude and values in the face of opposition and loss?

Paul lists his credentials and reasons for claiming spiritual success in Philippians 3:7–14, but then he writes them off as hopeless, instead preferring to identify himself fully with Christ, including the sufferings and humiliation of Christ. Like Paul, our attitudes and what we value should be transformed by our identity as Christians as we begin to realize the immense gift of God's grace given us in Jesus Christ.

GOD PROVIDES RESOURCES

10. We are not left on our own to suffer alone. Consider:

- Psalm 23
- Matthew 28:18–20
- John 14:16–17, 26
- 1 Corinthians 12:26–27
- Matthew 4:4

Who is with us, and what other resources of fellowship, encouragement, and support does God provide?

We are not left here to suffer alone. Consider the allies we have in God, as promised in Scripture, and discuss what each of them does for us according to the passages above:

Psalm 23—The Lord is our Shepherd and is with us all the way.

Matthew 28:18–20 (the Great Commission)—Jesus has all authority, including authority over our oppression and persecution, and is with us to the end of the age.

John 14:16–17, 26—Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to teach and comfort us.

1 Corinthians 12:26–27—We are bound to one another in the Body of Christ.

Matthew 4:4—God's Word sustains and nourishes us.

God gives us other resources every day and on an as-needed basis. Let the group try to come up with a list of God-given resources as a way to raise their personal awareness. They should be able to identify at least some of these resources, and perhaps more: He gives us pastors and teachers to give us His Word, administer the Sacraments of His grace, and protect us as a shepherd protects his sheep. He also gives us Christian fellowship for encouragement and support. As a contrast if time permits, ask the group what we should do if one or more of these resources are unavailable to us. For example, what do we do if we do not currently have a pastor

or if travel or conflict keeps us away from the Sacraments? And what do we do if the stress of hostility or persecution starts to divide our fellowship of believers?

RESPONSE ROOTED IN THE GOSPEL

11. Consider John 3:16 with 1 Timothy 2:4. What does this tell us about the heart of God and His desires and priorities? How should this guide and motivate us when we face hostility as God's people? How does it inform our roles as ambassadors or as the priesthood of believers?

John 3:16 and 1 Timothy 2:4 tell us in simple terms what God wants (for people to be saved) and why (He loves them). These overarching themes show us the mind and heart of God, and they should influence how we respond to any difficult situation. The heart and mind of God should inform our service as God's ambassadors, priests, and prophets or we will be off track and at risk.

12. Read Matthew 5:13–16 and note what Jesus says about our roles as salt and light in this world. Considering salt and light as metaphors, what do salt and light do that is beneficial?

Turning to the metaphors of salt and light, salt preserves and adds flavor; light shows us the path and shows us the truth so that we can avoid stumbling. Both of them benefit the community around us, even if opposed by those who prefer darkness.

13. Luther taught that our life is made up of vocations of service in areas such as family, work, church, and community. These vocations provide day-to-day opportunities for us to perform our roles as salt and light for families, neighbors, and communities. In other words, these are the situations in which God would use us, even if we don't suspect as much. Thus, when we encounter hostility, what kinds of questions should we ask rather than "Why me?"

We live out our life in vocations of family, community, employment, and church. This is where people see how we live and hear what we have to say, on a day-to-day basis. The Gospel should permeate us as we live out these vocations, or else we lose opportunities for working with Jesus and for pointing people to Him. When we encounter hostility, instead of a self-serving "why me?" we should ask how God would like to use the situation for His glory or to reach people with the Gospel. This is about His plans and not about us.

CHAPTER 4

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

RESPONDING WITH SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

1. Spiritual disciplines help provide a foundation for us as we respond to hostility:
 - Prayer
 - Self-examination
 - Forgiveness
 - Bearing witness
 - Mutual support
 - Knowing what we believe

Why would we call these things disciplines? What does this imply about their practice, and what does it suggest about our response to hostility?

Spiritual disciplines provide a foundation for us to respond to hostility. A useful analogy might be what we call fundamental baseball, where players need to learn to field the ball, hit the ball, and run the bases before they can go on to more difficult challenges such as winning the game. Another useful analogy might be basic training for military personnel, which includes strength, fitness, and endurance training before moving on to specialized individual training. Ask the group to consider what each of these disciplines includes and how it is relevant to our tenacity, strength, and faithfulness as Christians.

PRAYER

2. Read Acts 1:14; 4:31; and 12:5 and identify what these passages have in common. Why did the Early Church pray so much?

In each of these instances of prayer, the Church, or body of believers, faced some kind of hostile challenge or problem. They needed God's guidance to know how to handle it, and they needed Him to resolve the difficulty in some way that would glorify Him and allow continued spread of the Gospel. Without military, political, or economic strength, they really did not have any other options. But they realized that they depended on God and took action accordingly. One of the problems facing Christians today, at least in the United States, is that we often forget that we depend on God.

3. What should we pray if we know people facing hostility or persecution? Is there anything we should *not* pray?

Ask the group to brainstorm what they would pray on behalf of people facing persecution. Prayer topics might include strength, protection, deliverance, perseverance, health, and material support, but should include recognition of God's will and prayer that God will use the situation to spread the Gospel and to draw people closer to Him. They should also think about what they

might pray on behalf of the persecutors, perhaps praying for their salvation and for their persecution to be blocked.

Is there anything we should *not* pray? Consider the risks associated with inadvertently revealing the names and locations of Christians to those who wish to harm them. Discuss who we can trust and who we might be unable to trust, what kind of information we might need to maintain as anonymous or hold in confidence, and what else we might need to do to protect that information. On a different aspect of this question, are there any topics or requests that we should avoid praying because we think God might not agree or might even be offended? Consider the imprecatory psalms (e.g., Psalm 58). Why are they included in the Old Testament? Maybe their purpose was nothing more than to allow the psalmist to express his feelings, and God was okay with that. Or maybe God sincerely wants us to pray for justice, relief for the persecuted, and punishment of the wicked. This is a difficult topic to consider while not allowing our own feelings to take over, but it is worth discussion if time allows.

SELF-EXAMINATION

4. Read Romans 13:1–4 and 1 Peter 4:14–15 to see why we need to examine ourselves. If our self-examination is to be meaningful, what standard should we use to check our behavior?

We need to examine ourselves because the heart is deceitful above all things, and on a good day we can rationalize almost anything! We need to be very clear about our situation and whether we have done anything to bring trouble. If we break the law, we should expect consequences, and it is disingenuous to blame our punishment on persecution. Our standard for examination starts with God's Law but finds its best expression in Jesus Christ—we are to imitate Him and become Christlike in our behavior.

5. Read Acts 5:29 to see a situation in which response to opposition meant disobeying the governing authorities. If we need to disobey authorities as part of our response to hostility, how should self-examination help us know if we are correct?

Romans 13 makes it clear that we are to submit to governing authorities, and Jesus famously said to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and to God that which is God's. However, if these authorities direct us or pressure us to do something clearly contrary to what God directs, then God's authority trumps everything else. Without straying off too far into politics, it would be worth discussing examples of Christians who have had to make this kind of choice and how they arrived at their decision. Discuss the value of knowing God's Word and of participating in the orthodox Christian Church as a source of reality checks on our behavior and choices.

FORGIVENESS

6. Read Matthew 6:14–15. Why is it so hard for us to love our enemies?

We are by nature selfish, and it is hard to forgive someone who has wronged us. It is even harder if they don't recognize their fault and instead continue the bad behavior. However, God forgives us and expects us to forgive others, even when it is frustrating or just plain hard.

7. Compare three examples of forgiveness from Scripture: Jesus on the cross, Stephen when he was martyred, and Joseph forgiving his brothers. What do these have in common, and in what ways are they different?

Scripture helps us with examples:

- Jesus on the cross—forgave the people who crucified Him, even though, as He said, they did not really know what they were doing and were unrepentant.
- Stephen when he was martyred—forgave the people who stoned him, even though they were in such a state of rebellion that they covered their ears to avoid hearing Stephen’s words.
- Joseph forgiving his brothers—even though his brothers had meant to do away with him, Joseph could see that God had used the troubles and triumphs of his life to save his brothers and their families from famine, and he gladly forgave them.

8. What does forgiveness do for our persecutors? What if they are not sorry?

Unless they reject forgiveness, it releases our opponents from the burden of their sin. It also reminds them that they are not completely in control of the situation, since we have the power to forgive them, and this is not something they can take away or control. In the long run, it can remind them that God is in charge and holds them accountable.

9. What happens to us if we do not forgive? Think of a personal example that you could share, if appropriate.

We need to forgive for our own sake as well as for the sake of our persecutors. If we do not forgive, we violate God’s instructions to us as reflected in the Lord’s Prayer, and we start carrying a grudge, in this case a burden of guilt for having held on to the persecutor’s sin.

10. How does the world react to forgiveness, and what kind of opportunities might this create? Give examples, if possible.

Frequently the world is shocked at the idea that anyone would forgive another. This opens up opportunities to discuss sin, forgiveness, and God’s grace with people who are surprised by the forgiveness.

WITNESS

11. Is our confession of the Gospel intentional, or does it sort of just happen? Explain your answer.

The best answer is probably yes, both, since at least part of our witness to others involves speaking God’s Word while another part of our witness happens simply as people watch us going about our daily activities (i.e., living out our vocations).

12. What does 1 Peter 3:14–16 have to say about bearing witness in times of trouble?

Trouble often leads to opportunities to tell people about Jesus because bystanders or observers who see how we handle hostility will be curious about what we believe and how we can respond to suffering the way we do. In some cases, our persecutors may challenge us with a direct, skeptical question about our hope of salvation.

13. Is it possible for us to go through life unseen, with nobody drawing conclusions about what we know and believe from our words and actions? What is “witness,” and what happens if we try not to bear witness?

It is important to realize that witness is something God does through us, and it often involves more than one person. God may use us to open a conversation, or to plant the seed of the Gospel, or to answer questions as a way of weeding the planted seed, or to encourage growth once the seed is sprouted, or even to encourage the new Christian once established. The key is for us to be faithful and to realize that God may use us in one part of the process or another, but not necessarily for every step along the way. Our witness is particularly valuable because it reflects the fact that God has placed us in the right place at the right time in the mission field. Actually, we are a witness every day whether or not we mean to be, simply because people see us living out our vocations and because people watch us and take our measure in any number of interactions each day. It is impossible to not witness.

MUTUAL SUPPORT

14. Recall 1 Corinthians 12:26–27 and think of the obligations and opportunities we have for mutual support. What motivates our support?

Consider how the quality of our support for fellow Christians within our congregation affects the overall health of the congregation as well as our personal functioning in that part of Christ’s Body. This is true for the Church in a larger sense, though the effects may take longer to be felt from one part of the country or one part of the world to another. Take time to discuss the opportunities we have to support persecuted Christians, and discuss how to set priorities.

15. How does motivation by guilt or sense of obligation compare with motivation by the love of Christ and by realizing that we walk with Christ in His ministry? Consider Ephesians 6:18b–20; 2 Timothy 1:16–18; and 2 Corinthians 8:1–5, and then list the kinds of support you might like to receive if persecuted (think broadly). Turn this around and list how you might be able to support others who face persecution. If your pastor were jailed for speaking God’s truth, how would you support him?

Ephesians 6:18b–20—Consider how to provide prayer support and where we can find current information about prayer needs (see Appendix 1 in the book for resources).

2 Timothy 1:16–18—In addition to searching for Paul in Rome, the letter states that Onesiphorus refreshed him. Although Paul did not spell out the nature of that refreshment, it might have included encouragement, a time of companionship and fellowship, mutual prayer, and perhaps even material support in the form of food or other resources.

2 Corinthians 8:1–5—The positive attitude and enthusiasm expressed by the churches of Macedonia, seen in their begging for the opportunity to give, was probably even more precious than the money they contributed.

BELIEF

16. Does knowing what we believe involve head knowledge or heart knowledge?

Use this question to explore what it means to know the mind of God and to know the heart of God. Then discuss how it is that we come to know the heart and mind of God through preaching,

teaching, and studying God's Word. Granted, God's thoughts are higher than ours and His ways are higher than ours, and we are finite, limited creatures. But to the extent we are capable of learning anything, what could be more valuable than learning from the Bible? It may be useful for the group to consider working definitions of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom and to discuss how we seek these things in God's Word.

17. In view of the causes and effects of hostility toward Christians, what are the risks of being shaky or uncertain in what we believe? Consider 2 Corinthians 11:14–15a and John 8:44 as you develop your answer.

Many of those who oppose Christians come at us with their own beliefs, worldview, and sometimes with a false version of the Gospel. The issue with being uncertain, then, is that we could be deceived if we do not understand what we believe. These two passages speak to the satanic aspects of this risk:

- 2 Corinthians 11:14–15a indicates that the evil one can choose to appear as an angel of light, which suggests that he (or our opponents) might dress up a false gospel or even an entirely false religion in appealing, even glamorous, trappings.
- John 8:44 indicates that Satan is a pathological liar, and the father of lies. We saw this in action as he deceived Adam and Eve. The risk we face from some of our most (spiritually) dangerous opponents is that they would brew their false religion from a mix of 99 percent truth and 1 percent falsehood, typically by embracing some but not all of historical Christianity and mixing in some kind of denial of Jesus Christ.

18. Read Hebrews 4:12. What role does God's Word play in our beliefs, and what does this mean for our participation in Christian preaching, teaching, and Bible study?

Bottom line: the Bible is central to knowing what we believe, and it is central for the certainty of that belief. God's Word provides the standard by which we measure all other claims of truth.

CHAPTER 5

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

OPTIONS FOR ACTION

In addition to spiritual disciplines, Scripture gives us several different situational options for responding to hostility. These options include:

- Turn the Other Cheek
- Invoke Our Rights
- Disengage
- Play Better Defense
- Step Up the Proclamation
- Make Common Cause
- Take Our Leave
- Stay and Endure

Read chapter 5 of *Standing Firm* and be prepared to sketch out what each option might involve. Some of them are mutually exclusive (e.g., we cannot take our leave and stay at the same time) while others might be done in combination (e.g., we might invoke our rights while also making common cause with a newfound ally). Regardless, we will need to choose among these options of responding to hostility according to circumstances and in accord with God's priorities.

TURN THE OTHER CHEEK

1. Read Matthew 5:38–41 and explain what it means to turn the other cheek. Is turning the other cheek an ongoing thing or a one-time response? How does the eye-for-an-eye context of this passage shape our understanding of this response?

Matthew 5:39 is the classic text about turning the other cheek, but people often forget the verses that come just before and after it in the Sermon on the Mount. The eye-for-an-eye that comes immediately before suggests that Jesus wants turning the other cheek to replace a self-serving desire to seek revenge. This will shape our choices of how to take action when we face hostility. Ask the group to give examples of what this might look like for us. Depending on the circumstances, it could be as simple as letting an insult or an attack go by and recede into history rather than pushing back at the risk of making things worse. Try to deduce from the context also whether this is a one-time thing, an ongoing activity, or something that might come up more than once but still rarely. If this third kind of occurrence seems most likely, then ask the group what kinds of situations today might warrant turning the other cheek. Ask the group to identify situations in which turning the other cheek might be inappropriate, and then to explain why that might be so.

2. Read Matthew 16:24–26 and consider how turning the other cheek mimics Christ. Who defines the cross we should carry—God or us? How might God like to use our willingness to turn the other cheek or to take up our cross, and what might such a situation look like?

Ask the group to compare turning the other cheek with the idea of taking up our cross. When might we be guilty of creating our own cross, instead of accepting a cross that God gave us? If we decide what we are going to do, without waiting for God's guidance, this can morph into devising our own works out of pride rather than walking in the works God creates for us, per Ephesians 2:10.

INVOKE OUR RIGHTS

3. Consider some situations in which Paul invoked his rights as a citizen of Rome. What rights did Paul invoke, and what did this have to do with his life as a Christian? Look to the following passages for examples:
 - Acts 16:37–39a
 - Acts 22:25–29
 - Acts 25:10–12
 - Acts 16:37–39a shows Paul when he was being released from the jail at Philippi, having been imprisoned without due legal process.
 - Acts 22:25–29 shows Paul about to be flogged, when it was against Roman law to punish a citizen unless he had been convicted and sentenced under Roman law.
 - Acts 25:10–12 shows Paul appealing to Rome for his legal rights to avoid being tried by the Jewish Council in Jerusalem.

From these passages we can see that Paul usually invoked his rights in order to preserve the opportunity to confess his faith and preach God's Word. Sometimes he used his rights to protect the reputations of the new Christians in the community. How should these priorities guide our use of civic rights?

4. What civic rights and freedoms do U.S. citizens have, and what considerations should guide our use of them?

This part of chapter 5 lists a wide range of rights that we hold as U.S. citizens. Some of them might be useful to defend our freedom to confess and live out our faith while others might come into play in a defense against persecution. What recourse do we have if our civil rights are denied? As citizens of a representative democracy, we have the privilege of electing our representatives and governing authorities at local, state, and federal levels, but this privilege comes with responsibilities. Ask the group to balance their list of rights with a list of responsibilities.

5. If we live in a place where we have a say in our government through voting, what additional opportunities or responsibilities do we have to shape or protect our rights?

Ask the group to identify recent examples of Christians using their rights; was this for their own interest, for the sake of the Gospel, or both? The group should be able to come up with

different examples in various areas of life, given the breadth and variety of our legal protections and some of the controversial cases that have come up in the news.

DISENGAGE

6. Read Matthew 7:6 and consider what wild dogs and wild pigs were like in those days. Who was Jesus advising or guiding, and whom might He have described as dogs and pigs? What does this tell us about disengaging from a hostile situation?

Matthew 7:6 is often regarded as hard to understand and harder to apply. Check the adjacent verses for context, but it appears that this may be a stand-alone statement in the course of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So whom might Jesus have had in mind when He mentioned dogs and pigs? Explain to the group what dogs and pigs were like in those days: both kinds of animals were vicious, wild, dangerous, unclean, and had no use for pearls. Instead, wild dogs and wild pigs were primarily motivated by what they could eat, and they had no shame. What might Jesus have had in mind when He spoke of pearls that His disciples would be carrying, that He would give them this warning? The most likely explanation seems to be that Jesus is talking about us, His disciples, bearing the Gospel when we encounter dogs and pigs. From what Jesus says, the dogs and pigs are a threat both to the pearls and to our survival. Jesus is advising us to get away from this kind of danger and take the pearls with us.

7. Read Acts 13:44–46 to see how Paul disengaged from the hostility he found. What might it look like today to disengage yet continue speaking the Gospel? Give examples, if possible.

When the Jews in Lystra rejected the Gospel and started reviling Paul, he turned to the Gentiles and took the Gospel with him. This was an object lesson to those with ears to hear. They needed to listen and accept God's Word, or lose the opportunity. Ask the group to think of examples from current events where it might be necessary to disengage and take the Gospel elsewhere. This is a very serious step, not to be taken lightly, yet potentially justified if the danger poses such an extreme threat.

PLAY BETTER DEFENSE

8. Read Matthew 10:16 in its context and explain what it means to be shrewd and innocent. How can we be both shrewd and innocent at the same time? Is this deceptive behavior or genuine?

Matthew 10:16 is another passage that is often regarded as hard to apply. The adjacent Scriptures provide context, indicating that as Jesus sends His disciples out for His work, we go as sheep in the midst of wolves. Shrewd and innocent might not be the first words that come to mind when describing Christians, yet this is what Jesus directs us to be. Ask the group to define each word, and ask how they apply to Christian behavior. Shrewd implies good situational awareness and decision-making while innocent implies a certain genuineness, honesty, and integrity. If we are sheep among wolves as we go out into the world, it could often be important to be both shrewd and innocent as we encounter opportunities to confess our faith and yet try to avoid slanderous accusations or blame. To help explore this, ask the group to describe how Jesus was both shrewd and innocent.

9. Shrewd, innocent behavior suggests adapting to change, requiring a heads-up awareness of our situation and motives as they evolve. Consider these examples from Scripture:

- 1 Samuel 24:4–7 [David spared Saul’s life even though urged to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity to kill Saul.]
- John 7:5–10 [Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem unannounced after first declining to make the trip.]
- Mathew 14:15–19 [Jesus fed the 5,000 on short notice, and He used the opportunity to challenge and teach His disciples.]
- Acts 17 [Paul preached in Athens and adapted his presentation of the Gospel to speak to people who had no knowledge of God.]

Do these examples represent reactions to events or choices tailored to the situation? What might it look like if we took a more heads-up approach to defending against and responding to hostility? Give examples, if possible.

Ask the class to think of examples of Christians, churches, or ministries in hostile situations that seize opportunities, avoid trouble, or change plans in a proactive way rather than just reacting to circumstances. How does this amount to playing a better defensive game?

STEP UP THE PROCLAMATION

10. In the face of hostility, we can step up the quality of our ministry in word, in acts of mercy, or both. Read the story of Apollos in Acts 18:24–28. What did he already understand, and how was his knowledge incomplete until he met Priscilla and Aquila? Once taught, what was Apollos able to do for the church in Achaia? How did this help the church take its confession of faith to a higher level?

Once taught, Apollos was able to strengthen other Christians’ confession of faith by defending their understanding of the Christ from Scripture. Christians have differing levels of knowledge when it comes to understanding the Bible and what it means, so we need pastors, teachers, and apologists whom we can go to for help if challenged about some part of the Gospel. This helps us take our witness to a higher level of quality and to share God’s Word more boldly. Particularly if we have an opportunity to present the Gospel in a potentially hostile situation, as Paul often did, it would be important to speak from a solid basis of understanding. If the discussion goes in a direction in which our knowledge is limited, we should not try to fake it but take time to get help from other Christians. And do not hesitate to speak of what you know.

11. Read Mark 12:29–31 and, thinking specifically and broadly, consider who is your neighbor. How do we show love to our neighbors? Why is it important to be more diligent in confessing the Gospel in the face of opposition?

Refer the group to the parable of the Good Samaritan if there is any doubt over how anyone we serve or influence is a neighbor to us. With this understanding in hand, ask the group how we show God’s love to our neighbor. Don’t let the group stop with easy answers. Instead, press for people to think outside the box, and consider using the Lutheran understanding of vocation to structure the brainstorming. Wrap up this part of the discussion by pointing out that how we

treat our neighbor has a lot to do with our credibility, that it can open doors of opportunity that would otherwise be closed against our confession of faith, and that it can give us room to improve and expand our witness to those around us.

It is important to be more diligent with the Gospel and with how we show God's love to our neighbor in the face of opposition. When we face hostility or opposition, we will certainly also face additional scrutiny as our enemies look for ways to attack our credibility or our beliefs. We need to be able to explain what we believe and why, with integrity.

MAKE COMMON CAUSE

12. Paul found unexpected allies in at least two situations, as recorded in Acts 18:12–16 and Acts 23:6–10, and Jesus alluded to the possibility of unexpected collaborators or allies in Mark 9:38–40. What would it mean for us to make common cause with unexpected allies, whether individuals, groups, or entire organizations? Give examples from recent events.

Acts 18:12–16 shows us Gallio, Roman proconsul, holding court in Achaia. When the Jews attacked Paul and hauled him into court, Gallio unexpectedly dismissed the charges, setting Paul free to continue his work. Acts 23:6–10 shows us Paul on trial before the Jewish Council in Jerusalem. When he saw that the council was part Sadducees and part Pharisees, he took advantage of common ground with the Pharisees to play the two factions against each other and bring the trial to a halt. It might be useful to see if anyone in the group can think of other examples. One example might be Lydia, who became a Christian and supported the new church in Philippi. Another might be the ship's captain who prevented the soldiers from killing the prisoners, including Paul, when they were shipwrecked en route to Rome.

What kind of unexpected allies can the group think of for some of the hostility issues facing U.S. Christians? Examples might include the Mormon Church, Muslim or Jewish organizations, or even the American Civil Liberties Union, depending on the situation. Brainstorm how and in what areas we might be able to work with non-Christian groups—for example, in fighting legal battles, speaking up for freedom of speech or freedom of religion, or in providing material support to Christians and others in refugee camps.

13. How might working with allies assist our ministry in the face of opposition? What are the risks of teaming up with non-Christians or with non-Christian organizations? How can we avoid pitfalls while taking advantage of the alliance?

Recognize that making common cause with non-Christian organizations does involve some risks. We need to cooperate with our allies without lending them our credibility or compromising our confession of the Gospel. Given these considerations, ask the group to consider when it might be appropriate to go forward and take the risks and when we should insist on working on our own. If we go forward, perhaps we should use an implicit or explicit disclaimer to the effect that we see this collaboration as valuable and worth doing because of the issues it addresses, even though our groups do not agree on important spiritual matters. Of course, we have to mean it if we say it.

TAKE OUR LEAVE

14. Read Matthew 10:5–6, 11–15 and summarize the marching orders Jesus gave His disciples. Under what circumstances were they to leave one place of ministry for the next, and what were the implications? If they left one place for another, what were they supposed to do next? Read Acts 13:49–51 for an example of taking leave to move on for ministry elsewhere.

The disciples' ministry apparently included miraculous healings and proclaiming the Good News of God's kingdom, with the emphasis on proclaiming. They were sent forward without any support, other than what the people in each village might choose to provide, but with the assurance that God would look after them. If they were well-received, good. However, if anyone would not receive them or listen to their proclamation, they were to shake off the dust from their feet and leave. This effectively meant withdrawing the Gospel from that house or village, reflecting the fact that the residents were hostile, rejecting God's Word. If worse came to worse and they did have to leave, Matthew 10:23 says that they should go on to the next town, suggesting that they would resume ministry at their new location. Acts 13:49–51 provides an example: when Jews in Antioch rejected Paul and Barnabas and opposed their teaching, Paul condemned them and began taking the Gospel to the Gentiles (in effect, a different community).

15. What might taking our leave look like today? Is taking our leave from a community temporary or permanent? What happens to people's opportunity to hear the Gospel if the Christians leave? If we do leave, what kind of responsibility to confess our faith do we have in our next location?

Answers will vary to this question.

STAY AND ENDURE

16. Read 1 Corinthians 16:8–9 to see why Paul chooses to stay in Ephesus. What reasons does he cite, and what priorities seem to motivate his choice? Does he seem to think the adversaries or those who oppose him are enough reason to leave? Why not?

This is probably a matter of staying to endure a long-term situation rather than a once-in-a-while event. Paul must have seen great opportunities for ministry at hand for him to make that choice. From what you know of Paul, do you suppose he stepped up his teaching of the Gospel or went underground? What about the adversaries or opponents Paul mentioned? He could have seen adversaries as an exciting personal challenge, as an opportunity for evangelism, or as something he needed to push back against to support the Ephesian Christians.

17. What considerations might lead Christians to stay and endure hostility or persecution, or, if we once left an area of hostility, why might we go back later? Where else can we see this alternative in action today? What might it involve if your congregation had to take its ministry underground?

Give examples from current events, and discuss the apparent motivations for and consequences of staying in hostile territory, or even in the midst of war zones. One way to stay and endure might be to go underground, stick it out, and suffer, just as the church in Communist China went underground for decades. Staying and enduring might often involve suffering, as the

Christian minorities in Muslim or Communist countries (e.g., Iran, Syria, or North Korea) know very well.

18. Compare the concept of staying and enduring with the concept of turning the other cheek. In what ways are they similar, and in what ways do they differ?

Ask the group to discuss the differences and suggest examples of each tactic. Staying might require or involve submitting to hostile or indifferent authorities, and it might mean suffering. Ask the group to brainstorm how we might stay and endure in concert with some of the other options.

CHAPTER 6

GOSPEL-BASED GUIDANCE

When we face hostility, oppression, or persecution, we need to respond proactively rather than reacting out of fear or self-interest. This is almost always a situational thing, as the circumstances of each situation will be a little different (or maybe a lot different) and we need to deal with what is happening rather than reliving past experience. So how do we decide what to do, given the options we have been discussing? To be able to respond in a proactive, God-pleasing way, we need to understand God's desires and priorities from John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4; and the Great Commission. We also need to realize that God has already given us some power over the situation and some sense of His priorities for guidance.

1. Read Matthew 16:13–19 and consider the power of forgiveness God delegates to us. How should what we do in a hostile situation reflect our understanding of God's Law and Gospel? How do our choices and behavior affect our credibility? How might they affect how people view or receive the name of Jesus, and His Gospel?

God entrusts His people with the Office of the Keys and, as spelled out in the Lord's Prayer, expects us to forgive as we have been forgiven. What kind of power does forgiveness have over our persecutors? Try substituting the word *authority* and we realize that the one who forgives has authority and power over the one forgiven. In the ultimate sense, God completely owns that power, and He delegates it to His children. What we do, then, reflects how we understand and live according to God's Law and Gospel, so we need to take care that we do not put our own interests ahead of what God would like to do with our opponents and with our neighbors. Our neighbors need God's grace and forgiveness, as do our opponents. It is fine to pray for the defeat of our enemies, but we also need to pray for their repentance and salvation. What does it do to our confession of the Gospel if we are reluctant to forgive?

2. Read 1 Peter 1:1–2 and consider how God has chosen us and placed us. As we learn to know the heart and mind of God, how should this guide us as we choose our response to hostility, opposition, or persecution?

Our moral authority is less tangible than our power to forgive, but it is real nevertheless. Perhaps this is like goodwill: hard to measure, but you know when you don't have it! Yet Christians do have moral authority because we are entrusted with God's Word and because we know the living God, Creator and Lord of the universe, on a first-name basis. Our choices and behavior affect our credibility, though, since actions often speak louder than words. This means that our choices of how we respond to hostility will necessarily reflect on our credibility and confession of the Gospel. Thus we need to choose wisely, with God's wisdom, and with an eye toward the implications of our choices. Our choices and behavior also affect how people view or receive the name of Jesus and His Gospel, because we are identified so strongly with Him as individuals and as the Church. Again, we need to choose our options wisely because whatever choice we make will reflect on our Lord.

3. Review what John 3:16 and 1 Timothy 2:4 tell us about the heart of God—His desires and priorities. How should this guide and motivate our choices, and how does it inform our roles as ambassadors or as the priesthood of believers when we face hostility?

Ultimately, knowing the heart and mind of God is our basis for discerning how we as Christians respond to hostility and persecution. We learn the heart and mind of God in His Word, the Bible, and through His Son, Jesus Christ. So from what we have studied of the heart and mind of God, what does God hope of us? Or if *hope* is the wrong word, what does He expect, or what would He like to see us do? Consider once again that God has placed us to perform certain roles according to His will and according to the gifts given us by the Holy Spirit. Consider that He has placed us in the world as part of a diaspora, as He seeds the world with Christians. Consider that He sent His Son, as described in John 3:16, knowing in advance that Jesus would become the sacrifice to redeem us because of His great love for us. Finally, consider that we are Christians (“little Christs”) in God’s plans. Taken together, what does this mean for how we respond to hostility, oppression, or persecution? Our answer to that question really is all about Jesus and not about us.

STANDING FIRM

A Christian Response to Hostility and Persecution

STUDENT SECTION

OUTLINE OF DISCUSSION TOPICS

Introduction

1. What's the Situation?
 Situation Analysis
2. Theological Understanding of Hostility
 Examples from the Old Testament
 Examples from the New Testament
 Recap, and Our Path Forward
3. Theological Basis for Christian Response
 God Works through Us
 God Uses Our Circumstances
 God Provides Resources
 Response Rooted in the Gospel
4. Christian Response
 Responding with Spiritual Disciplines
5. Christian Response
 Options for Action
6. Gospel-Based Guidance

GROUND RULES FOR DISCUSSION

- This is a complex topic, so please approach it with an open mind.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- Constructive critical thinking is an asset; shun cynicism.
- Respect other opinions; give others a turn in the discussion.
- Stay out of politics; this is a lot bigger.
- Be wary of sensationalized or sanitized news.
- God's Word is more authoritative than any other source of information.

INTRODUCTION

1. Read Matthew 5:39–41 and identify its context. Then discuss the questions that prompted the writing of this book:
 - When facing hostility or persecution, what can we do besides turn the other cheek?
 - How do we know if we are facing hostility or if someone is just having a bad day? How might this affect the way we respond?
 - When does hostility shade into persecution? What if we aren't sure it is persecution?
 - What does God expect of us, and how might He like to use us in bad situations?

2. Read the following Bible passages and discuss the context and type of challenge being addressed in each case.
 - Mark 13:9
 - 1 Corinthians 16:13–16
 - Galatians 5:1
 - Ephesians 6:10–13

3. When you read the passages in number 2 above, do they strike you as warnings or as assurances? Can we stand firm on our own? If not, then upon whose strength do we stand?

CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S THE SITUATION?

SITUATION ANALYSIS

1. Before responding to a hostile situation, we should pause for a reality check. Think about a situation in which you felt as if you have faced hostility, or a situation you heard about on the news. Then ponder the following questions.
 - Reality check #1: Are we encountering hostility, or is this just a disagreement over competing ideas? In other words, do we have opponents who are trying to shut us down, or is this an opportunity for us to share God's truth in the face of competing ideas and values?
 - Reality check #2: Have we broken a law or done something that would deserve punishment? In other words, is this hostility or are we being punished justly?

2. Read 1 Peter 4:14–16 and explain the difference between the two types of suffering discussed in this passage. Give examples of each kind of suffering.

3. Read Romans 13:1–4. What is the government's responsibility if we do something wrong? Under what circumstances might we have to choose between obeying God and obeying government? What would you do if your government overstepped its authority and asked you to do something that is clearly against the will of God?

4. In general, people might respond to Christians or the Gospel in any of several different ways. Have you seen people offer these responses? How so?
 - Apathy: indifference to Christianity
 - Disagreement: an honest difference of views, which might be an opportunity for confessing our faith rather than a hostile situation per se
 - Hostility: negative behavior expressed in written or spoken words against Christianity
 - Opposition: attempts to eliminate the Christian message of the Gospel
 - Persecution: attempts to eliminate the Christian message and block or eliminate Christians

5. In reality, how people treat Christians is both simpler and more complicated than the above responses; it can change with time and can differ depending on how we respond.
 - Which kinds of responses might be prompted by our identity in Christ?
 - Which kinds of responses do we see today, and where? Give examples.
 - Do you think the way Christians are treated in your country is getting better or worse? Why?

6. According to John 15:18–20, what kind of treatment should we expect, and why? What does this suggest about how we should understand our situation?

7. Read John 10:14–18. Jesus knew He would die for us, yet He set aside His glory and did it anyway. Why? If we are Christians, or “little Christs,” what does this mean for us as we seek to follow Him?

8. Genuine hostility, opposition, and persecution exist worldwide.
 - List examples from the United States, Canada, and Europe.
 - List examples from Muslim, Hindu, and Communist countries.
 - These situations (and our situation) can change quickly, so how can we stay abreast of developments?

9. Do you think there are spiritual reasons for hostility toward Christians, or are people just in the wrong place at the wrong time? Recalling that God is sovereign and uses His people in difficult situations, how might God use those who flee persecution and those who stay behind?

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF HOSTILITY

1. We can find evidence in the Bible for three related roots of hostility:

- Original sin, and sin in general
- Opposition to God, and particularly to Jesus Christ
- Spiritual warfare waged by forces of evil

We can usually trace the source of hostility toward Christians back to one or more of these three roots, but like the roots of a tree, the roots of hostility can be hard to see and may be tangled and intertwined. Regardless, they reflect the fallen nature of humanity and the world in which we live. Who offers a remedy for these problems?

2. Looking first at original sin, read Genesis 3:1–7 with special attention to verse 5. What did Adam and Eve think they would gain by disobeying God?

Next, read Romans 5:12–19. What impact did Adam’s original sin have on the human race? What happens when our human lust for sovereignty and self-interest runs into God’s sovereignty and interests?

3. Read Romans 1:18–32, which summarizes the corrosive and destructive power of sin. What does it take to rescue us from this downward spiral?

4. Turning next to the world's opposition to God, read John 15:18–25. Why do people hate Jesus, and how does this relate to original sin?

5. For an example of this opposition in action, read Acts 9:1–5. What did Saul think he was doing, and what did Jesus reveal about the true nature of Saul's behavior?

6. We encounter hostility because our opponents identify us with Christ. Read the following passages. What do they say about how we are linked to Jesus?
 - John 1:12
 - Luke 8:21
 - 1 Corinthians 12:27
 - Ephesians 5:31–32

7. Given our close ties to Jesus and our citizenship in God's kingdom, are God's people ever fully assimilated into this world? Why or why not?

8. Finally, looking to spiritual warfare as a root of hostility, read Ephesians 6:10–12. According to this passage, who is under attack, and by whom? How might this affect our situations?

9. Spiritual conflict is often hidden from our view, but we catch glimpses of it in several passages of Scripture:

- 1 Chronicles 21:1
- Job 1:6–12; 2:1–6
- Daniel 10:12–14
- Luke 22:31–34
- 2 Corinthians 12:7–10

With these examples in mind, how might the evil one attack us? What comfort do we find in 1 Peter 5:8–10?

EXAMPLES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT

10. Elijah—Isolated and Alone

- Skim 1 Kings 18:20–19:18 and outline the sequence of events. Who opposed Elijah, and why? How would this relate to the roots of hostility we have already identified?
- How did God use Elijah’s situation, and what did He do for Elijah?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this look like today?

11. Daniel—Persecuted for Prayer

- Read Daniel 6:4–13. Who opposed Daniel, and why? How would this relate to the roots of hostility we have already identified?
- How did Daniel respond to the opposition? Do you think he was following God’s guidance or acting on his own? If the latter, what do you make of his motives?
- How did God rescue Daniel, and what did the king learn from this outcome?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this look like today?
- Read Daniel 1:17 and 9:1–3. How well did Daniel know God, and where had Daniel learned about God? How would this understanding guide his choice of actions when threatened?

12. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—Pushed over the Brink

- Read Daniel 3:8–18. What kind of trouble did Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego encounter, and why? How would this relate to the roots of hostility?
- How did they respond to the king's edict, and what were they prepared to do if things did not turn out their way? What could motivate them to take such a stand?
- How did God rescue Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and what did the king learn from this outcome?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this kind of challenge look like today?

13. Ezra and Nehemiah—Hostility at Work

- Skim over Ezra 4:1–6 and 4:24–5:5 and then skim through Nehemiah 2:17–19; 4:1–3; and 6:10–14. Note that Ezra and Nehemiah were leading groups of Jews back to Jerusalem after roughly seventy years of exile in Babylon.
- What kinds of opposition do these accounts relate as the Jews began to rebuild the temple and city wall in Jerusalem, and what kinds of motives were behind it? How would this relate either directly or indirectly to the roots of hostility?
- How did Ezra and Nehemiah respond, and how did they know to stay the course rather than compromise?
- How did God use the situation to encourage and re-establish His people?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this kind of opposition look like today?

EXAMPLES FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT

14. Peter and John—On Trial for the Gospel

- Read Acts 4:1–22. Who opposed Peter and John, and why? Where might Christians run into similar kinds of opposition today? Give examples from recent events, if possible.
- How did Peter and John respond to this opposition by words and deeds? Why would they respond in this way rather than submitting?

- Read Acts 4:23–31. How did the church view the opposition that had arisen? Identify how they responded. Why do you suppose they would take this approach?
- What can we learn from this sequence of developments, and what might this kind of situation look like today?

15. Stephen—Martyred for the Faith

- Skim through Acts 6:8–8:1 and outline the sequence of events. What kind of trouble did Stephen encounter, and what do you think was behind the opposition? How would this relate to the roots of hostility we have already discussed?
- Why didn't Stephen use his speech as an opportunity to defend himself rather than explaining and defending the Gospel? How would you describe his motives, since he did not seem interested in saving himself from martyrdom?
- Why do you think Stephen's audience covered their ears? What does this tell us about their willingness to hear about God?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this kind of situation look like today? Give examples, if possible.

16. Paul—Opposed, Arrested, and Tried

- Read 2 Corinthians 11:24–27 for a quick summary of the kinds of opposition and persecution that Paul encountered in the course of his ministry.
- Read Acts 16:19–24; 17:32; and 18:5–6, 12–13 for three specific instances of opposition to Paul. What kinds of opposition did Paul encounter, and what seems to have motivated the opposition? How would this relate to the roots of hostility?
- How did God use Paul's circumstances despite the hostility he encountered, and what kind of opportunities for sharing the Gospel did the situations generate?
- What can we learn from this example, and what might this look like today? Give examples, if possible.

RECAP, AND OUR PATH FORWARD

Genuine hostility, opposition, and persecution exist all over the world. Incomplete reporting and conflicting accounts make it difficult to understand every situation, and much persecution likely goes unreported. Nevertheless, persecution happens every week. As we take stock of the ground covered so far in this study, we need to keep two caveats in mind:

1. If we break the law, we deserve punishment. Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13–25 both make clear that if we do something illegal, we should expect punishment from the government. For example, if I deal in illegal drugs in Mexico, I should not be surprised to find myself in a Mexican jail.
2. Differing views may be opportunity in disguise. We might find ourselves discussing religious or spiritual matters in a conversation that becomes so intense that we feel threatened and sense hostility. However, we need to discern whether this is intentional or if it is simply a high-energy discussion that might lead to opportunities to confess our Christian faith.

Roots of hostility include:

- Original sin—we each want to be God.
- Opposition to Christ—people oppose the Lordship of Christ and oppose those who bear the name of Christ.
- Spiritual warfare—unseen and often misunderstood spiritual attacks from the evil one and his agents.

Old Testament and New Testament accounts show God using bad situations for multiple purposes, so we need to ask if God might be using our situation for His purposes. With these thoughts in mind, we will move on to examine biblical foundations and options for how to deal with hostility, opposition, and persecution.

CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

1. Stop for a moment and think about how you might first react when faced with hostility or persecution.
 - Is your response likely to be physical, emotional, or spiritual (e.g., by turning to prayer or to Scripture)?
 - Is a group of Christians, such as a church, likely to respond in the same way as an individual? How might a group response be different?
 - What is wrong with asking “why me?”

2. Read Psalm 139:13–16 and Ephesians 2:8–10. What does this tell us about God’s plans for us, and what does this suggest about why we are here?

GOD WORKS THROUGH US

3. Read 2 Corinthians 5:18–20. What does it mean to serve as God’s ambassador? Whom do we represent, and to whom? What happens to an ambassador in case of war?

4. Read 1 Peter 2:9. What does it mean to serve as God’s priest? In the priesthood of believers, whom do we serve and whom do we represent? How might this role be misunderstood?

5. Read Acts 2:14-18. What does it mean to serve as God's prophet? What does this mean for us today?

6. Read 1 John 4:19. What motivates our work, and how is our motivation sustained in the face of opposition? How does this reflect the heart and priorities of God?

GOD USES OUR CIRCUMSTANCES

7. Skim over the life of Joseph (Genesis 37–50) and identify the cycles of good and bad circumstances that he encountered. Were these random events of fate, or did God have a hand in them? How did God use Joseph and these situations for His own purposes?

8. Scan Acts 6–8 to see what happened to Stephen after the church appointed him as deacon. What ministry activities (or church work) did Stephen perform, and what events, good and bad, happened to him? How did God use Stephen for His own purposes in these circumstances?

9. What does Philippians 3:7–14 say about personal priorities, and how should this inform our attitude and values in the face of opposition and loss?

GOD PROVIDES RESOURCES

10. We are not left on our own to suffer alone. Consider:

- Psalm 23
- Matthew 28:18–20
- John 14:16–17, 26
- 1 Corinthians 12:26–27
- Matthew 4:4

Who is with us, and what other resources of fellowship, encouragement, and support does God provide?

RESPONSE ROOTED IN THE GOSPEL

11. Consider John 3:16 with 1 Timothy 2:4. What does this tell us about the heart of God and His desires and priorities? How should this guide and motivate us when we face hostility as God’s people? How does it inform our roles as ambassadors or as the priesthood of believers?
12. Read Matthew 5:13–16 and note what Jesus says about our roles as salt and light in this world. Considering salt and light as metaphors, what do salt and light do that is beneficial?

13. Luther taught that our life is made up of vocations of service in areas such as family, work, church, and community. These vocations provide day-to-day opportunities for us to perform our roles as salt and light for families, neighbors, and communities. In other words, these are the situations in which God would use us, even if we don't suspect as much. Thus, when we encounter hostility, what kinds of questions should we ask rather than "Why me?"

CHAPTER 4

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

RESPONDING WITH SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

1. Spiritual disciplines help provide a foundation for us as we respond to hostility:
 - Prayer
 - Self-examination
 - Forgiveness
 - Bearing witness
 - Mutual support
 - Knowing what we believe

Why would we call these things disciplines? What does this imply about their practice, and what does it suggest about our response to hostility?

PRAYER

2. Read Acts 1:14; 4:31; and 12:5 and identify what these passages have in common. Why did the Early Church pray so much?
3. What should we pray if we know people facing hostility or persecution? Is there anything we should *not* pray?

SELF-EXAMINATION

4. Read Romans 13:1–4 and 1 Peter 4:14–15 to see why we need to examine ourselves. If our self-examination is to be meaningful, what standard should we use to check our behavior?

5. Read Acts 5:29 to see a situation in which response to opposition meant disobeying the governing authorities. If we need to disobey authorities as part of our response to hostility, how should self-examination help us know if we are correct?

FORGIVENESS

6. Read Matthew 6:14–15. Why is it so hard for us to love our enemies?

7. Compare three examples of forgiveness from Scripture: Jesus on the cross, Stephen when he was martyred, and Joseph forgiving his brothers. What do these have in common, and in what ways are they different?

8. What does forgiveness do for our persecutors? What if they are not sorry?

9. What happens to us if we do not forgive? Think of a personal example that you could share, if appropriate.

10. How does the world react to forgiveness, and what kind of opportunities might this create? Give examples, if possible.

WITNESS

11. Is our confession of the Gospel intentional, or does it sort of just happen? Explain your answer.

12. What does 1 Peter 3:14–16 have to say about bearing witness in times of trouble?

13. Is it possible for us to go through life unseen, with nobody drawing conclusions about what we know and believe from our words and actions? What is “witness,” and what happens if we try not to bear witness?

MUTUAL SUPPORT

14. Recall 1 Corinthians 12:26–27 and think of the obligations and opportunities we have for mutual support. What motivates our support?

5. How does motivation by guilt or sense of obligation compare with motivation by the love of Christ and by realizing that we walk with Christ in His ministry? Consider Ephesians 6:18b–20; 2 Timothy 1:16–18; and 2 Corinthians 8:1–5 and then list the kinds of support you might like to receive if persecuted (think broadly). Turn this around and list how you might be able to support others who face persecution. If your pastor were jailed for speaking God’s truth, how would you support him?

BELIEF

16. Does knowing what we believe involve head knowledge or heart knowledge?

17. In view of the causes and effects of hostility toward Christians, what are the risks of being shaky or uncertain in what we believe? Consider 2 Corinthians 11:14–15a and John 8:44 as you develop your answer.

18. Read Hebrews 4:12. What role does God’s Word play in our beliefs, and what does this mean for our participation in Christian preaching, teaching, and Bible study?

CHAPTER 5

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

OPTIONS FOR ACTION

In addition to spiritual disciplines, Scripture gives us several different situational options for responding to hostility. These options include:

- Turn the Other Cheek
- Invoke Our Rights
- Disengage
- Play Better Defense
- Step Up the Proclamation
- Make Common Cause
- Take Our Leave
- Stay and Endure

Read chapter 5 of *Standing Firm* and be prepared to sketch out what each option might involve. Some of them are mutually exclusive (e.g., we cannot take our leave and stay at the same time) while others might be done in combination (e.g., we might invoke our rights while also making common cause with a newfound ally). Regardless, we will need to choose among these options of responding to hostility according to circumstances and in accord with God's priorities.

TURN THE OTHER CHEEK

1. Read Matthew 5:38–41 and explain what it means to turn the other cheek. Is turning the other cheek an ongoing thing or a one-time response? How does the eye-for-an-eye context of this passage shape our understanding of this response?
2. Read Matthew 16:24–26 and consider how turning the other cheek mimics Christ. Who defines the cross we should carry—God or us? How might God like to use our willingness to turn the other cheek or to take up our cross, and what might such a situation look like?

INVOKE OUR RIGHTS

3. Consider some situations in which Paul invoked his rights as a citizen of Rome. What rights did Paul invoke, and what did this have to do with his life as a Christian? Look to the following passages for examples:
 - Acts 16:37–39a
 - Acts 22:25–29
 - Acts 25:10–12
4. What civic rights and freedoms do U.S. citizens have, and what considerations should guide our use of them?
5. If we live in a place where we have a say in our government through voting, what additional opportunities or responsibilities do we have to shape or protect our rights?

DISENGAGE

6. Read Matthew 7:6 and consider what wild dogs and wild pigs were like in those days. Who was Jesus advising or guiding, and whom might He have described as dogs and pigs? What does this tell us about disengaging from a hostile situation?
7. Read Acts 13:44–46 to see how Paul disengaged from the hostility he found. What might it look like today to disengage yet continue speaking the Gospel? Give examples, if possible.

PLAY BETTER DEFENSE

8. Read Matthew 10:16 in its context and explain what it means to be shrewd and innocent. How can we be both shrewd and innocent at the same time? Is this deceptive behavior or genuine?

9. Shrewd, innocent behavior suggests adapting to change, requiring a heads-up awareness of our situation and motives as they evolve. Consider these examples from Scripture:
 - 1 Samuel 24:4–7
 - John 7:5–10
 - Mathew 14:15–19
 - Acts 17

Do these examples represent reactions to events or choices tailored to the situation? What might it look like if we took a more heads-up approach to defending against and responding to hostility? Give examples, if possible.

STEP UP THE PROCLAMATION

10. In the face of hostility, we can step up the quality of our ministry in word, in acts of mercy, or both. Read the story of Apollos in Acts 18:24–28. What did he already understand, and how was his knowledge incomplete until he met Priscilla and Aquila? Once taught, what was Apollos able to do for the church in Achaia? How did this help the church take its confession of faith to a higher level?

11. Read Mark 12:29–31 and, thinking specifically and broadly, consider who is your neighbor. How do we show love to our neighbors? Why is it important to be more diligent in confessing the Gospel in the face of opposition?

MAKE COMMON CAUSE

12. Paul found unexpected allies in at least two situations, as recorded in Acts 18:12–16 and Acts 23:6–10, and Jesus alluded to the possibility of unexpected collaborators or allies in Mark 9:38–40. What would it mean for us to make common cause with unexpected allies, whether individuals, groups, or entire organizations? Give examples from recent events.
13. How might working with allies assist our ministry in the face of opposition? What are the risks of teaming up with non-Christians or with non-Christian organizations? How can we avoid pitfalls while taking advantage of the alliance?

TAKE OUR LEAVE

14. Read Matthew 10:5–6, 11–15 and summarize the marching orders Jesus gave His disciples. Under what circumstances were they to leave one place of ministry for the next, and what were the implications? If they left one place for another, what were they supposed to do next? Read Acts 13:49–51 for an example of taking leave to move on for ministry elsewhere.

15. What might taking our leave look like today? Is taking our leave from a community temporary or permanent? What happens to people's opportunity to hear the Gospel if the Christians leave? If we do leave, what kind of responsibility to confess our faith do we have in our next location?

STAY AND ENDURE

16. Read 1 Corinthians 16:8–9 to see why Paul chooses to stay in Ephesus. What reasons does he cite, and what priorities seem to motivate his choice? Does he seem to think the adversaries or those who oppose him are enough reason to leave? Why not?
17. What considerations might lead Christians to stay and endure hostility or persecution, or, if we once left an area of hostility, why might we go back later? Where else can we see this alternative in action today? What might it involve if your congregation had to take its ministry underground?
18. Compare the concept of staying and enduring with the concept of turning the other cheek. In what ways are they similar, and in what ways do they differ?

CHAPTER 6

GOSPEL-BASED GUIDANCE

When we face hostility, oppression, or persecution, we need to respond proactively rather than reacting out of fear or self-interest. This is almost always a situational thing, as the circumstances of each situation will be a little different (or maybe a lot different) and we need to deal with what is happening rather than reliving past experience. So how do we decide what to do, given the options we have been discussing? To be able to respond in a proactive, God-pleasing way, we need to understand God's desires and priorities from John 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:4; and the Great Commission. We also need to realize that God has already given us some power over the situation and some sense of His priorities for guidance.

1. Read Matthew 16:13–19 and consider the power of forgiveness God delegates to us. How should what we do in a hostile situation reflect our understanding of God's Law and Gospel? How do our choices and behavior affect our credibility? How might they affect how people view or receive the name of Jesus and His Gospel?
2. Read 1 Peter 1:1–2 and consider how God has chosen us and placed us. As we learn to know the heart and mind of God, how should this guide us as we choose our response to hostility, opposition, or persecution?
3. Review what John 3:16 and 1 Timothy 2:4 tell us about the heart of God—His desires and priorities. How should this guide and motivate our choices, and how does it inform our roles as ambassadors or as the priesthood of believers when we face hostility?