



Persecution

{ A WORD STUDY }

PUBLIC DOMAIN IMAGE

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WHEN I PEN THESE WORDS MEDIA reports continue to tell of the cowardly and brutal attacks on Christians in a Pakistani park on Easter Sunday 2016. The perpetrators, hardline radical Muslims, stated they intentionally and systematically targeted Christians. The world community has expressed sorrow over the loss of life and disbelief that terrorists would intentionally target Christian women and children. While the greater family of believers should express sorrow, we should not be surprised. During His earthly ministry Jesus warned that His followers should expect persecution.¹ Peter and Paul also warned that Christians would be mistreated for their beliefs. Most anti-Christian harassment is intended to intimidate believers, forcing them to renounce their faith and separate themselves from Christ. In Romans Paul assured his readers that no such thing could happen. In Romans 8:31-39, Paul provided a summary statement of the blessings mentioned in chapters 5-8. In verses 31-34, he reminded the readers that they were justified because of Jesus' atoning death and resurrection. In verses 35-39, he reminded them that their justification was secure because of the love of Jesus and the Father. In verse 35, to make that point, he asked a rhetorical question: "Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (CSB). Two verses later Paul answered his question with a resounding, "No!" Nothing can separate a child of God from the love of Christ. The first three of the potentially separating situations (affliction, distress,

and persecution) appear to be synonymous. Was Paul being repetitive to make a point? Are these three simply identical, misfortunate situations, or does each refer to a different type event that might, in human thinking, separate a believer from Christ's love? Deeper study shows that Paul had three distinct, unique kinds of sufferings in mind. For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the etymology, meaning, and first-century significance of the word "persecution."

The English word "persecution" comes from the Greek *diogmos*. The related Greek verb *dioko* gives us, "to persecute." *Dioko* appears in the eighth-century B.C. works of Homer. *Diogmos* appears three centuries later in the writings of Aeschylus. The full range of Greek literature used both words regularly.² The basic meaning of both words had the idea of pursuit, but with varied nuances depending upon context. For example, Homer used *dioko* to speak of pressing on or running in book 23 of the *Illiad*. He wrote, "for if at the turning-post thou shalt drive [*dioko*] past the rest in thy course."³ In book 22, Homer used *dioko* to speak of the pursuit of an object or person. Describing Achilles's pursuit of Hector, Homer wrote, "As a man in a dream who fails to lay hands upon another whom he is pursuing [*dioko*]- the one cannot escape nor the other overtake."⁴ The

Right: Terra-cotta oil flask (*lekythos*); white-ground Attic ware. The flask is decorated with an image of a young warrior cutting his hair; likely a

scene from the story "The Seven Against Thebes," a tragedy by Aeschylus produced in Athens about 470 B.C.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/ NEW YORK (607547)

Ruins of the amphitheatre that stood on the outskirts of Carthage in North Africa, which was part of the Roman Empire. The amphitheatre was often the scene of violent and bloody entertainment, combat to the death between armed men, men against animals, or fighting between animals. In 202, two believers, Perpetu  and Felicit , were martyred by wild animals.



Right: Bronze bust of the Emperor Claudius, who ruled A.D. 41-54. Claudius ordered all Jews to leave Rome, which meant most believers also had to flee.

Far right: A wide-angle view of Philip's Martyrium at Hierapolis. It was built to commemorate Philip the apostle's founding a church here and his martyrdom.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/25/65)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS (5/9/11)

Septuagint (third century B.C.) used *diogmos* in this way.⁵ Proverbs 11:19 says, “Genuine righteousness leads to life, but pursuing [*diogmos*] evil leads to death.” *Dioko* could also refer to setting something in motion or pursuit.⁶ The Greek playwright, Aeschylus (fifth-century B.C.), used the word this way in his work, *Persians*. He wrote, “With eyes spewing the black flame of a bloodthirsty dragon he drives angrily his army of many hands and many oars as fast as he drives [*dioko*] his own Syrian chariot.”⁷ The Septuagint used *dioko* to speak of pursuit in persecution. David prayed, “Save me from all those who pursue [*dioko*] me” (Ps. 7:1).

In the New Testament, both words retain the idea of pursuit, but just as in non-biblical writings, context determines the meaning. The New Testament uses *dioko* about 45 times, and its meaning varied. For example, Mark 1:36 uses a derivative of the term to speak of Simon Peter searching for or pursuing Jesus: “Simon and his companions searched [*katadioko*] for him” (CSB). Jesus used it to speak of the certain persecution His followers would experience: “Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven. For that is how they persecuted [*dioko*] the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:12, CSB). On the other hand, the New Testament uses *diogmos* in only nine verses, but every occurrence refers to pursuit in the sense of seeking to persecute.

Paul used the word *dioko* more than any other New Testament writer. Of the 55 occurrences of the 2 words combined, 25 are in his letters. Of those 25, 16 refer to persecution. In Paul's writings, and the New Testament as a whole, where both *dioko* and *diogmos* are used speak of persecution, the harassment is always for religious reasons.⁸

Paul's use of *diogmos* in Romans 8:35 in the list of hardships his readers would face would have been particularly encouraging. While the terms “affliction” and “distress” described difficulty Christians would face because of Christ, *diogmos* spoke specifically of persecutors' systematic attempts to separate God's children from the love of Jesus.

The Jewish Christians who were a part of the Roman church had recently experienced organized harassment at the hands of the government. Since the Romans did not differentiate the Christians from the Jews, Jewish Christians had to leave when Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from the city. Soon, all believers living in Rome would face organized persecution at the hands of Nero. Paul's words would have strengthened their resolve to remain faithful and assured them that no attempt, as organized and systematic as it may be, could pull them from the Father's loving hands.

Through the years, many have tried to separate believers from Christ to no avail. Interestingly, history has proven that persecution often does just the opposite. In the face of hatred many believers have strengthened their faith and grown closer to Christ, and the church has expanded into areas previously untouched by the gospel. Tertullian, the third-century church father, was correct when he wrote, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”⁹

1. See Matthew 5:10-11; 10:16-24; John 15:20.

2. “διωγμός” (*diogmos*, persecution) and “διώκω” (*dioko*, run after; pursue) in William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), 201.

3. Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 23:344, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1924). Available from the Internet: data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0012.tlg001.perseus-eng1:23.319-23.350.

4. Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 22:199, trans. Samuel Butler. Available from the Internet: classics.mit.edu/Homer/Iliad.22.xxii.html.

5. The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

6. Albrecht Oepke, “διώκω” (*dioko*, to persecute) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 229.

7. Aeschylus, *Persians* 81, trans. G. Theodoridis. Available from the Internet: www.poetrytranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Persians.htm.

8. James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, vol. 38a in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 505.

9. Tertullian, *The Apology* 50 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Allen Menzies, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1895).

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