

Intimidation Against the Church

15 February 2024



When I lived in the Klein Karoo, I was an enthusiastic mountain biker. I used to relish riding out into nature and exploring farm trails. However, there were two things I never enjoyed: headwinds and uphill. Cycling into strong winds, especially on inclines, was disheartening, and I had to remind myself, “No pain, no gain”! This experience is how we can feel as friends of Jesus living in a sinful world that undermines the sacred and true.

How Should We As The Church Respond to Opposition?

How do we respond to the headwinds and uphill, the pressures and intimidating anti-God ideas we face that [challenge our faith](#)?

Expect Difficulty

Firstly, we should expect difficulty. Let’s not be like some of the early Christians who seemed caught off-guard when the gusts of intimidation and trouble came against them because of their faith (see 1 Peter 4:12). We remember that Christianity was birthed into trouble; into a pagan world with many competing gods threatened by the radical message that Jesus is the true Lord.

Today, we face the buffering of “*spiritual forces of evil*” (Ephesians 6:12, ESV), working through people and systems that replace God with Man as the centre of all things. For example, ‘truth’ is proudly and defiantly redefined as ‘*whatever is real to you*’. And whoever claims the God of the Bible is the defining truth is seen as an intolerant trouble-maker. Suppose we don’t celebrate our society’s idea of [social justice](#), sexual freedom, gender diversity, and ‘tolerance’ (defined now as having to agree with different viewpoints, rather than respectfully debate them and agree to disagree). In that case, we are seen as narrow, hateful and bigoted. These are real headwinds we face as we follow Christ.

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Jesus Himself tells us plainly, that because we identify with Him, *"the world hates you"* and *"if they persecuted me, they will also persecute you"* (John 15:19-20, ESV).

Why would Jesus say this to the disciples? Is He being a killjoy? While the Lord brings life to the full, He wants us to develop a [resilient mindset](#) that is not shaken when we get intimidated or attacked for loving Christ and honouring the Scriptures. *"I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away"* (John 16:1, ESV).

Stay Vigilant

Secondly, we are to be vigilant. A seasoned cyclist knows to keep their wits about them for dangers on the road. We do well to remember the warning: *"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour"* (1 Peter 5:8, ESV). The term *"sober-minded"* refers to being spiritually and mentally alert, knowing that we face a spiritual enemy who tempts us to drift away from the truth of the Gospel. One of the ways he does this is through the winds of [false ideas and seductive arguments](#). Therefore, we are to have *"minds that are alert and fully sober"* (1 Peter 1:13, NIV), so we can learn how to respond rightly.

As we face intimidating people or confusing ideas that challenge our Christian faith, the answer is not to hide away but to engage with their objections and ideas. I have found that there is nothing as effective at causing me to wrestle through what I believe as friends and family who challenge my faith. Having sceptical people in my life has been a surprising gift to me, as they have forced me to re-examine my faith and learn to defend it. God's will is for us to always be *prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect* (1 Peter 3:15, ESV).

God wants us to learn to give answers for what we believe in reasonably, and even persuasively (see Paul's example in Acts 19:8; 26:28). And we are commanded to do so *"with gentleness and respect."* When we disagree, we do so with a gracious attitude, never raging or running away.

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Be Hopeful

Thirdly, we are to be hopeful. From a secular perspective, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl experienced first-hand the brutal horrors of World War II German concentration camps. From that experience, he wrote *'Man's Search for Meaning'*, giving profound insight into how people can endure great suffering. He explains that those who made it through the most unimaginably tough times weren't the strongest or fittest, but often those who kept hope – who were able to dream for the future. And this empowered their will, enriched their inner lives and gave them an inner resolve and freedom from which they could draw, which no Nazi guard could take away from them.

Scripture itself also teaches that our ability to endure is motivated by [hope](#) (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

And our hope is rooted in the Lord, who always keeps His promises. Like the Psalmist writes amid headwinds and dark valleys, *Why are you cast down, O my soul?... Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God*" (Psalm 42:5, ESV). We also echo Paul's words in our hearts: *"we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe* (1 Timothy 4:10, ESV).

We identify today with early church believers facing trouble and persecution. Their greatest hope was looking forward to their final salvation when Jesus would return as the rightful Lord of all. Paul calls it *"our blessed hope"* (Titus 2:13, ESV). I have often been provoked and challenged by this truth. We place our hopes in temporal things, yet our surest hope is found in God. Do we long, in hope, for the rightful King to return? Our longing and hope for the return of Jesus is probably the most significant fuel to help us remain joyful and resilient amid an anti-Christ world.

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In Closing

In His unsearchable wisdom, our great God chooses to use the blustery headwinds and steep uphill to grow us into Christian maturity and resilient faith. As we navigate the pressures and trials of our faith, we will do well to expect difficulty, stay vigilant, and be hopeful. And let us always be ready to give an answer for this great hope within us!

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