THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

Though the United States is now known for the religious freedom it promises all citizens, the early colonies made no such guarantees. Most of the first thirteen colonies in America had their own state religions. Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire were Puritan, for example, and New York, Maryland, and the two Carolinas were Anglican. Many of the colonies required public officials to take a religious test before taking up office, and Delaware’s Constitution in 1776 obliged them to take this oath: “I do profess faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His only Son, and in the Holy Ghost, One God, blessed for evermore; and I do acknowledge the holy scriptures of the Old Testament and New Testament to be given by divine inspiration.” Just like the European governments that they had fled from, they had established new state governments that again relied heavily on their respective churches. However, when the colonies realized that a revolution against England would only succeed if they united, they decided to follow Rhode Island’s pattern of not having a federally supported church rather than choosing a favored state-church.

In His wisdom, God at times raised up new nations with new forms of government to provide refuge to oppressed believers. Prophecy has long foretold that God always has a plan to deliver His persecuted church. This week’s lesson will study some of those prophecies, which also reveal the limits God placed on persecution—lines He would not allow persecution to cross.
Write out Daniel 7 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out verses 23–28. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the passage.
PERSECUTING THE SAINTS

The bitter hatred and intense persecution Jesus and His apostles faced foreshadowed the level of cruelty the church endured in later centuries. Wealth, power, and influence combined their strength to attack God's people; kings and popes working together deployed formidable armies against believers who remained loyal to the Bible, seeking to eradicate them. The more the earthly authorities fought against God's Word, however, the more stunning the success of those who defended God's Word. This is still true today; opposition serves only to further glorify God, despite the best efforts to overthrow God's work.

Several biblical prophecies foretold the centuries of church persecution, saying a blasphemous power would persecute God's people. Daniel 7:8–25 depicted this blasphemous power as a little horn. To begin understanding exactly what this little horn symbolized, we must look at the context. Chapter 7 details the symbolic visions Daniel had while serving under King Belshazzar in Babylon (v. 1). He saw four beasts that represented four successive kingdoms (v. 17), which, in order, are Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. The fourth beast had ten horns, each of which represented a nation that emerged after the Roman Empire collapsed (vv. 23, 24). As predicted, when that collapse occurred, the former empire was scattered into separate tribes and nations, out of which the little horn appeared and gained authority over the rest (v. 20).

John sees this same entity symbolized by a beast rising out of the sea in Revelation 13:1–10. Both Daniel and John describe this power as the worst persecuting force in history (Dan. 7:21; Rev. 13:7). John also repeats that this persecution would last 3.5 prophetic years (called “times”), 42 months, or 1,260 prophetic days—all the same length of time using ancient Israel's calendar system (Dan. 7:25; Rev. 12:6, 14; 13:5). (Back then, every month had thirty days, every normal year had twelve months, and leap years had an extra month.) Apocalyptic prophecies are loaded with symbolism, and time periods are no exception. A prophetic day symbolizes a literal year (Num. 14:34; Ezek. 4:6), making the 1,260 prophetic days of persecution 1,260 actual years of persecution.

This period of time began in A.D. 538 when Byzantine Emperor Justinian delivered the pope from the control of the Ostrogoths, a Germanic tribe that had occupied Rome and minimized the authority of the pope. For many of the following 1,260 years, the papacy (i.e., the little horn) focused on securing every possible benefactor. One after the other, wealth, property, schools, libraries, courts, armies, teachers, kings, judges, ambassadors, and generals submitted to Catholicism's enchanting influence. All these forces combined to extinguish all who dared believe anything that deviated from Catholic doctrine. Because of this near-unanimous support, millions lost their lives during the attempts to enforce state-approved Christianity—attempts such as the Crusades and the Inquisition. 

(Cont. on p. 77.)
SURVIVING PERSECUTION

Though many believers today live in places where the risk of persecution is low, there are unfortunately a large number who must hide their faith—be baptized and share the gospel in secret for fear of retribution. Converting to Christianity can result in violent backlash from family or, in some cases, punishment from local government authorities. Others live in fear of gangs or threats from the neighborhood or workplace. For the past two thousand years, most of God’s people have lived in difficult circumstances surrounded by dangers. For those who enjoy a safe, peaceful life, the sobering prophecy of the little horn in Daniel 7 should result in empathy for the persecuted (1 Cor. 12:26) and the realization that the Bible’s greatest concerns do not arise from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or secularism, but from Christianity.

The Bible shows no favoritism; it’s honest about the good and bad within Christianity. It acknowledges that some of the ugliest tyranny in the world has come from within Christianity, as ironic as that is. Paul highlighted this very fact when he referred to that tyrannical and recurring power as the “son of perdition” (2 Thess. 2:3, 4), a title reserved for Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus (John 17:12). Judas was not an outsider; he dwelled within Jesus’ own inner circle. In the same way, the little horn that persecutes God’s people appears within Christianity’s inner circle.

That God did not allow the tribulation to continue indefinitely should greatly encourage believers. He limited the persecution 1,260 years (Dan. 7:25; see inGest for explanation) and cut the most intense periods of adversity short: “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s sake those days will be shortened” (Matt 24:21, 22). The papacy suffered a deadly wound when the pope was arrested by Napoleon Bonaparte’s general during the French Revolution in 1798 (Rev. 13:3). That year, the papacy lost most of the privileges it had enjoyed for the past millennium. It no longer had the power to force its will on anyone.

Since then, God has given His people every possible advantage in the work of spreading the gospel. He has provided church facilities, schools, hospitals, printing presses, and media outlets around the world and has given us the ability to instantly connect and communicate with many of the remotest people groups via the internet. He has given a great many people access to an incredible amount of knowledge on the Bible, history, and science, among many other valuable subjects. God has not withheld the gift of prophecy, either! He promised to send the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4–8), which in effect means He is physically with us, guiding us every step of the way. What more could we need? The church is no longer a persecuted church in the wilderness; it is one with increased knowledge, increased opportunities, and increased responsibility. Jesus said, “For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). With this in mind and compared to previous generations, do we today use our privileges to their maximum benefit?

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The Persecuted Church
What relationship do the following verses have with Daniel 7?

2 Thessalonians 2:1–12
Revelation 7:13–17
Revelation 12:13—13:10
Revelation 17:1–6
Mark 13:9–13
Romans 5:1–5
Romans 8:31–39

What other verses come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

(Cont. from inGest, p. 75):

Fortunately, none of this took God by surprise. He had foreseen the medi-eval persecution, warned His followers of it, and promised that it would come to an end. True to His Word, the papacy's sovereignty was effectively shattered in A.D. 1798—1,260 years after Justinian, as foretold—when Napoleon's general Berthier arrested Pope Pius VI. The prophecy of the little horn had been partially fulfilled.
It’s easy to focus on all the persecution of the past and the future and forget that the central figure in the great controversy narrative is none other than the Son of Man, who will oversee the downfall of every earthly kingdom. We’ve been focusing on Daniel 7, which is more than just a prophecy—it’s a promise! The grand finale of this chapter will be realized when all nations and all languages unite under Christ’s reign. At that time, He will share the reward of His victory with His people: “Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey Him” (Dan. 7:27). What a generous and precious gift! No matter how dismal the circumstances, no matter how unjust and cruel the persecution, those who stand with Jesus can look forward to sharing His victory.

Similar encouraging promises are scattered throughout the New Testament. In his letter to the Romans, Paul assured us (using rhetorical questions) that there are certain things persecutors can never take from their victims: “If God is for us, who can be against us?... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:31–39). Nothing, not even death, can take God’s love from a faithful believer. It just isn’t possible!

In the beatitudes, Jesus’ persecuted followers received His final two blessings along with His encouragement: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:10–12). Though Jesus promised that others will receive a reward too (Matt. 6:1–18), the only reward He promised would be great is the one for the persecuted. In Revelation, John promised that every believer who suffers the same kind of persecution that Jesus suffered will enjoy a very close connection with their Savior in heaven (7:13–17). Dwelling closely with Jesus is the ultimate reward. What higher honor could we receive?

For those of the world, it’s natural for tribulation to extinguish hope, but for the Christian, it only strengthens it. As Paul said, “We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3, 4). Though oppressors can take property and life, God’s Word has promised that they can never take love, joy, or hope. The enemy can in no way diminish our reward in heaven.
SUFFERING WITH CHRIST

“God never leads His children otherwise than they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning, and discern the glory of the purpose which they are fulfilling as co-workers with Him. Not Enoch, who was translated to heaven, not Elijah, who ascended in a chariot of fire, was greater or more honored than John the Baptist, who perished alone in the dungeon. ‘Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake.’ Philippians 1:29. And of all the gifts that Heaven can bestow upon men, fellowship with Christ in His sufferings is the most weighty trust and the highest honor.” (Ellen White, The Desire of Ages [1898], 224, 225.)

“In every age God’s chosen messengers have been reviled and persecuted, yet through their affliction the knowledge of God has been spread abroad. Every disciple of Christ is to step into the ranks and carry forward the same work, knowing that its foes can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. God means that truth shall be brought to the front and become the subject of examination and discussion, even through the contempt placed upon it. The minds of the people must be agitated; every controversy, every reproach, every effort to restrict liberty of conscience, is God’s means of awakening minds that otherwise might slumber.” (Ellen White, Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing [1896], 33.)

“All who in that evil day would fearlessly serve God according to the dictates of conscience, will need courage, firmness, and a knowledge of God and His word; for those who are true to God will be persecuted, their motives will be impugned, their best efforts misinterpreted, and their names cast out as evil. Satan will work with all his deceptive power to influence the heart and becloud the understanding, to make evil appear good, and good evil. The stronger and purer the faith of God’s people, and the firmer their determination to obey Him, the more fiercely will Satan strive to stir up against them the rage of those who, while claiming to be righteous, trample upon the law of God. It will require the firmest trust, the most heroic purpose, to hold fast the faith once delivered to the saints.” (Ellen White, The Acts of the Apostles [1911], 431.)

“In all ages the Saviour’s chosen have been educated and disciplined in the school of trial. They walked in narrow paths on earth; they were purified in the furnace of affliction. For Jesus’ sake they endured opposition, hatred, calumny. They followed Him through conflicts sore; they endured self-denial and experienced bitter disappointments. By their own painful experience they learned the evil of sin, its power, its guilt, its woe; and they look upon it with abhorrence. A sense of the infinite sacrifice made for its cure humbles them in their own sight and fills their hearts with gratitude and praise which those who have never fallen cannot appreciate. They love much because they have been forgiven much. Having been partakers of Christ’s sufferings, they are fitted to be partakers with Him of His glory.” (Ellen White, The Great Controversy, 649, 650.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

If read as a chapter of prophecies and promises, what encourages you in Daniel 7?

How can those who enjoy peace and safety better use our privileges to their maximum potential? What would that look like in everyday life?

How can we better help those living in places of persecution?

What biblical promises do you find the most meaningful when suffering hardships?

Think about the close connection that those who suffer persecution will have with Jesus in heaven (Rev. 7:13–17). What will that be like?

Have you ever witnessed how opposition against God’s work makes His success more glorious and stunning?

How should those who enjoy peace and safety now spiritually prepare for tougher times?