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PUMPKINS & PERSECUTION

Have you heard how Christians are like pumpkins? God picks you out of His patch, brings you into His house, and cleans you all up. He carves out all the yucky stuff inside, saving you from sin and unbelief. Then He carves a smile on your face, and puts His light inside you to shine to everyone around.

Good story, and a great way to see yourself in this fall season! Like **John 15** says, yourself as the fruit of the vine of Christ, and you bearing fruit for Him - as new creations, representing Christ to the world as you show-&-tell the life-transforming good news about Jesus.

God's pumpkins aren't those jack-o-lanterns carved with ghoulish features. But don't expect everyone to like God's pumpkins. Some people don't just ignore them, they deface or smash them. Jesus said it would be like this, in John 15:20 "**if they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.**"

Experts describe Christian persecution as "any hostility, experienced from the world, as a result of one's identification with Christ." It can include verbal harassment, hostile feelings or attitudes, and hostile actions. It can include beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education or employment, and murder.

You hear a lot about terrible persecution of Christians in the Middle East, even in Islamic countries with large populations of Christians since the first century. God's Word instructs us to pray God's provision and protection as they endure horrific attacks, and help provide their spiritual and physical needs.

More than 75% of the world's population lives in areas with religious restrictions. While various religious groups endure persecution, statistics show that globally, Christians are the most persecuted in the world today. Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from government, neighbors, or invaders. (You can get details at Persecution.com and OpenDoorsUSA.org and PewForum.org &tc).

The impact in communities and countries is not just spiritual, but also economic, social, and political. Christianity transcends class and wealth. Historically, Christians are those building hospitals and schools, and providing relief for poor and disadvantaged people around them. The strong work ethic of Christians contributes greatly to local and national economies. Persecution not only destroys life and family, but community structure, stability, and viability.

But just because persecution of Christians defies good sense, don't expect it to stop. In John 15:18 Jesus says, "**if you were OF the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you OUT of the world, therefore the world hates you.**"

Don't think it won't happen here. Christians threaten the world's pocketbook and power structure. We present Jesus Christ as LORD of your life. Allegiance to Jesus transcends every other relationship. Our believing and behaving, thinking and living, derives from God's Word. We follow God's Truth, not lies of the world (*anti-God system*), the flesh (*your own sinful desires*), and the devil (*enemy of your soul*). That's why God's pumpkins don't look like the world's jack-o-lanterns.

People who want their own way, not God's way, don't take kindly to you showing a better way. They don't want you successful in any way, and will take measures to derail you. This happens at many levels, and may affect your own life in ways you haven't yet recognized. We'll explore this in upcoming columns.

Meantime, regardless whether your party or candidates fared well in the midterm election on Tuesday, don't expect persecution to lighten up any time soon. BUT, God promises power to persevere - the Holy Spirit who indwells all who trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. (**John 15:26**).

So they may try to blow out the light shining through your smiling pumpkin face - but they can't extinguish the flame of the Holy Spirit, who empowers you to be witnesses for Christ, in every circumstance.

So, "this little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine!"