

A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship

By Glenn Penner

It is well recognized by those who work among persecuted Christians that few attempts have been made to develop a biblical theology of persecution. Most attempts consist of selected texts arranged thematically which, while helpful and better than nothing at all, fail to reveal the extent to which suffering for righteousness is addressed in the biblical text. Much of the problem, it seems to me, comes down to a failure to adequately consider many of the scriptural passages on suffering in their context. For example, it is rarely recognized that the New Testament authors are not overly concerned to answer the question of suffering in general (i.e., suffering due to living in a fallen world). That such suffering occurs is recognized but most of the New Testament passages that address suffering do so in the context of suffering for righteousness and not because of sin or because one lives in a fallen world. But in many of the classic books on suffering, this type of suffering is hardly ever stressed.

This is to be expected, I suppose, since most Christians in the West have little or no experience with persecution per se. In our quest to make the biblical text applicable to daily life, the tendency is for Western preachers and teachers to misapply these passages to situations of general physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering because the biblical texts that speak to suffering for righteousness cannot readily be applied to a setting where there is little or no persecution. Unfortunately, this misapplication is subsequently turned around upon the text itself in future readings. Hence, the application influences future interpretations, resulting in the typical Bible student in the West never even suspecting that the biblical texts that deal with pain and suffering might be dealing with suffering for righteousness' sake rather than suffering because of sin. This also influences how Western Christians view and deal with those who suffer for their faith in other societies. We fail to recognize that persecution is normative for the follower of Christ historically, missiologically, and (most importantly) scripturally.

There is a clear scriptural link between persecution and discipleship. Indeed, there can be no discipleship without persecution; to follow Christ is to join Him in a cross-carrying journey of reconciling the world to the Father. That this journey is set in the context of conflict, self sacrifice, and suffering is alluded to as early as Genesis 3:15 when the Lord affirms that Satan's judgment, accomplished through human instrumentality, will bring deliverance to the offspring of the woman, but it will take place in a process of bruising and pain. The deliverance will come through the bruising of the serpent's head, but in the process the heel that bruises him will be also be bruised. This truth is illustrated in the following chapter when the first murder takes place following an act of worship, as Cain's sacrifice is rejected by God while his brother's is accepted. In jealousy (a common reason given in scripture for persecution), Cain kills his brother. It is obvious that the New Testament views Abel's murder as much more than the result of sibling rivalry or a family squabble that got out of control.

Jesus clearly saw Abel's death as an act of martyrdom (Matthew 23:35), as does the apostle John (1 John 3:12). John explains that Abel's death was because Cain's acts were evil and Abel's were righteous. Abel's death is clearly set in a context of martyrdom, a result of the conflict between the world and those who belong to God (1 John 3: 13).

Persecution is hardly an exclusively New Testament phenomenon. Numerous passages refer to the suffering inflicted on the people of God throughout the Old Testament historical narratives. It is likely that the psalms of lamentation address the issue of the suffering of God's people more clearly than any other portion of Scripture (including the New Testament). The imprecatory psalms cry out for God's justice on those who inflict the righteous without cause. The thrust of the book of Job is how a man of God suffers not because of sinfulness of himself or creation but because of righteousness and calls for trust in God in the face of such a paradox. This train of thought is amplified by the call of the prophets to look ahead to the Day of the Lord, believing that history is under the control of an Almighty God who, from the foundation of the world, has set His plans in motion of reconciling the world to Himself.

All of this comes into focus with the coming of Jesus Christ, the revelation of the triune God. Through Christ, we see, among other things, that sacrificial love is in the very nature of who God is. To suffer and die to accomplish His Father's purposes was not to be unexpected; Jesus could not be God and do anything but. Weakness, suffering and sacrifice are God's *modus operandi*. This is how God accomplishes His work: not through strength or compulsion but through love and invitation. As so, the Servant of God suffers and dies, as do those who follow Him. This is to be expected; this is God's way of reconciling the world to Himself. A cross-centered gospel requires cross-carrying messengers. When Jesus declared, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24), these words are to be taken much more literally than we are accustomed to doing. At stake is not so much a willingness to die for Christ but a readiness to die to one's unconditional obedience to the Crucified One.

The demand of Jesus on His followers is to tread the path of martyrdom. As He prepared to send His disciples out as sheep among wolves and He told them that they would likely die in the process of carrying out their ministry. In order to build His Church (Matthew 16:18), His death was necessary, as He points out in 16:21. This is the foundation. Without Christ's death there is no redeemed community. But just as Christ's cross was needed to establish His Church, our crosses are needed to build His Church (16:24). Both are needed. As Josef Ton observed, "Christ's cross was for propitiation. Our cross is for propagation." To be called to follow Christ is to receive a call to suffer (e.g. Acts 9: 16; 14:22; 1 Thessalonians 3:3; 1 Peter 2:21; 3:9, 17).

It was this understanding that sacrifice, suffering, shame, and even death were the normal cost of discipleship that fuelled the evangelistic efforts of the first century Church. They did not expect to experience all of the blessings of heaven in this world. They knew that by their faithfulness, even unto death, they were storing up rewards in heaven. Contrary to the Western belief that it is a blessing not to be persecuted, they knew that it was the persecuted who are blessed (Matthew 10-12). Rather than following the common Western practice of thanking God for the privilege of living in a free country where we do not suffer for Him, the early Christians thanked God for the honour of suffering for His sake (Acts 5:41). They knew that in order to bring life to others, they must die; to see others experience peace with God, they would have to suffer the violence of the world; to bring the love of God to a dying world, they would have to face the hatred of those whom they were seeking to

reach. It is in this context that the biblical authors described spiritual warfare; not freedom over bad habits or psychological problems, but the brutal reality of witnessing to the faithfulness of God in the face of suffering, sacrifice and death. It was only in this context that the purposes of God would be accomplished.

This is also the reality of persecution today. We continue the task of taking the gospel to the end of the earth, knowing that He goes with us and that we do not suffer alone. In all of our afflictions, God is afflicted and just as Jesus demanded of Saul of Tarsus, so He asks of today's persecutors, "Why do you persecute Me?" The knowledge that nothing can separate us from Christ's love (Romans 8:35), that the Spirit prays for us when we can only groan in agony (Romans 8:26,27) and gives us His words in the face of our accusers (Matthew 10:19,20) provides the help that the disciples of Jesus require to remain faithful witnesses. God has provided all that is necessary for the disciple to stand firm.

Yes, there may be fear, but by God's grace it need not control us. Yes, there may be terrible suffering, but suffering is not the worst thing that can happen to the child of God; disobedience to the Father is.

As we witness the testimonies of courageous persecuted brothers and sisters in person or through reports, it is worthwhile to reflect on the words of Peter, "For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly" (1 Peter 2:19 ESV). In these words, Peter defines grace as being enabled to endure suffering due to one's faithfulness to God. As we read the accounts of those who have suffered for the sake of Christ, we might be justified in saying that, from the world's perspective, those who endure persecution are heroic. But from God's perspective, Peter reminds us, they are recipients of grace. Peter stresses that enduring suffering is evidence that God is at work in one's life. There is no glory for the sufferer. No hero worship. No merit for those who are able to endure hardship, no boasting of one's achievements. It is evidence of God's grace. It is all a work of God, from beginning to end. Is it any wonder that near the end of his first epistle, written especially to instruct persecuted believers to stand firm in their faith, the apostle writes, "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 5:10, 11 ESV)

This hope is solidified with the Revelation of John's vision of the victorious Lamb. Written to address the apparent discrepancy between the belief that God's kingdom has come and that Jesus Christ is Lord and the reality that the forces of evil continued to exist, to dominate the culture and even flourish, while oppressing Christians to varying degrees, Revelation provide the churches with what they most needed; a revelation of who Jesus Christ is. God's priority is not so much to answer the questions that His people may have as to why they are persecuted as to give them a revelation of Himself. In this final book of the Bible, Jesus is revealed as the one who is in the midst of the churches, as one who is in control of history and who will soon bring history to its conclusion. The believers to whom John writes face the challenge of witnessing for Christ in the midst of temptations to compromise with idolatry. John sees the persecution as increasing and his warning is meant to prepare the churches for that day, as well as for the challenges they presently face. He sees that not all of the churches are prepared; some are already well on their way to denying Christ. The Christian in Revelation is called to witness for Christ, even to the point of death, in the midst of compromising Christianity and a hostile world, knowing that his reward is coming. Revelation helps us to see that there is always hope. Defeat may

seem imminent to those in the midst of persecution; the disciple needs to be reminded that so is victory. The victory is not, however, as some might suppose, the punishment and destruction of the wicked; the victory is the vindication of the Church. Redeemed, triumphant in heaven, secure forever with the Lamb who has won the victory for Himself and the Church through His death and His conquest over it, the Church participates in this victory with Christ as Bride and Bridegroom. By refusing to deny their allegiance to Him and acknowledge the idolatrous claims of the world order (13:15, 14:9), enduring even unto death, the martyrs share in Christ's victory over it and in His triumph over all the powers of evil (12:11). God has determined to save the world by the foolishness of the cross of Christ and by the foolishness of the crosses of His children whom He has chosen and called for this very purpose. He will be consistent in using this unique method until He achieves His final goal. God will thus bring the nations to Himself by the sacrifice of His obedient Son followed by the sacrifices of His other obedient sons and daughters.

Facts about Persecution

- Many experts suggest that more than 200 million people in over 60 nations face violent persecution or detention because of their identity as Christians. At least that many or more are discriminated against on a regular basis because of the faith.
- How many Christians are martyred each year? It is difficult, if not impossible, to say for certain how many Christians are killed for their faith annually. Queries to those who do such research have shown that their figures are, in fact, projected averages or statistical guesses rather than based on hard figures or actual documentation. Sadly, most martyrs suffer and die anonymously, unknown, forgotten, their deaths unrecorded except in heaven. Even email, which most of us consider a basic everyday tool is a struggle to use in places like Ethiopia, Burma, and much of central Africa. Even where it is more readily available, it is not secure. Much goes unreported or is reported months, even years later. For many Christians, persecution is such a part of life that it hardly dawns on the afflicted to tell the world. They don't know who to tell anyway and there are only so many organizations with limited staff to seek them out. Even then, many are nervous about sharing what they know for fear of retribution. In short, persecution, by its very nature, defies being statistically analyzed with any degree of certitude. Hence, we are reluctant to give a number that we can't say, with certainty, is accurate.
- Christians are the largest identifiable group in the world today who are denied their basic human rights simply because of who they are.
- In 1960, there were twice as many evangelical Christians in the West than in the rest of the world. Forty years later, there are now four times as many evangelicals in nonwestern nations than in the West.

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- Evangelicals are growing at a rate three times faster than the world's population growth rate and are the world's ONLY body of religious adherents who are growing by means of conversion. In 2000, evangelicals had an annual growth of almost 5%, while Islam grew at half that rate.
- In China, the Protestant church had maybe 1,260,000 members in 1949. Today the church has grown to at least 81 million members (registered and unregistered). The Catholic Church has grown from 3 million to over 12 million during the same 50 year period.
- In Africa alone, the rate of church growth has been nothing short of staggering, skyrocketing from an estimated 10 million Christians in 1900 to 360 million in 2000.
- The church in Sudan is the fastest growing church in the Muslim world; this despite facing some of the most horrendous persecution known to man in recent years.
- In Ethiopia, the church has exploded. In 1960, evangelicals numbered 200,000 and made up 0.8% of the population. In 40 years, by 2000, the church has grown to nearly 12 million, making 20% of the population. This has taken place despite great persecution during the communist era of 1974-1991. Today, converts in rural areas face great persecution: stoning, bombing of church buildings, discrimination, expulsion from home, driven from their villages en mass.
- India now has 10 churches with more than 10,000 members and 30 that have more than 3,000 members. In 1999, one church leader reported baptizing 2231 in a single day. Some Indian denominations are reporting that they are planting a new church every day.
- Among the Hmong people of northern Vietnam, there were NO evangelical Christians in 1989. In 11 years, by 2000, they numbered over 175,000. All of this church growth has taken place while being brutally oppressed by Vietnamese authorities.
- One of the main reasons for the persecution of Christians worldwide has been because of its rapid growth. It is truer to say that church growth causes persecution than that persecution causes church growth. In some countries, such as Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and other parts of the Middle East, persecution has actually caused the church to significantly shrink in size over the past 100 years.

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