

Blessed are the Persecuted!

R. Stanley

Persecution is no novelty. Martyrdom came into the world early; the first man who died was for religion! According to the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, an estimated 1,60,000 Christians have been martyred in 1997. This has happened mostly in the 10/40 window, that is, in the nations between the latitude of 10 degrees and 40 degrees. Ninetyseven percent of all unreached peoples live here. Many of these nations are closed to the Gospel. Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Iraq, Laos, Morocco, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE and Vietnam are among them.

Though there is religious freedom in India to practise, preach and propagate one's religion, the recent happenings in this subcontinent show beyond doubt that there's widespread opposition and intolerance to the Gospel of Christ. It's sad that a section of our countrymen has forgotten what the light of the message of Christ has done for the enlightenment of our people and the development of our Nation. Dr. Rajendra Prasad the first President of India observed, "Christian missionaries have worked among the tribals and at great sacrifice have spread education and generally helped in effecting improvement in their living conditions."

The common reasons for persecution are four. 1. *Religious reasons*: The fundamentalist groups of other religions resist the spread of the Gospel. They attack Christians who proclaim that Christ is the only way for eternal salvation and persuade people to believe on Him. The severe persecution of the Bible believers by the Roman Catholic Church during the time of Reformation also falls under this head. 2. *Political reasons*: The Christian action at times is interpreted as treason or disloyalty. This situation arises when Christians resist a civil law which goes against their conscience and Biblical principles. The refusal of the Hebrew midwives to kill male babies, and that of Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah to worship the golden image are examples. 3. *Racial reasons*: Hitler's antisemitic feeling led him to kill Jews in thousands. 4. *Ideological reasons*: Down through history totalitarian regimes found their philosophy opposed to Christian faith. Communism is one example.

Persecution is not a surprise to God. It must not be a surprise to us either. When women mourned and lamented Jesus as He was carrying the Cross to Golgotha, He turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children ... For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?" (Lk 23:26-31). Earlier Jesus had told His disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you ... Remember the word that I said to you: A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (Jn 15:18,20). After writing to Timothy how he endured persecutions, Paul conclusively stated, "ALL who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus WILL suffer persecution" (2 Tim 3:10-12). He also predicted that things would grow "worse and worse" (v 13). We must be surprised only if we are NOT persecuted! John Flavel (1620-1691) asked, "Who was more innocent than Christ? And who was more persecuted? The world is the world still!"

Basically we should never forget that God is Sovereign. Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Nothing happens to His people without His knowledge and permission. The very hairs of our head are all numbered (Mt 10:30). We are inscribed on

the palm of God's hands (Isa 49:16). All things — seemingly good or bad — work together for good for those who love God (Rom 8:28). The evil that's designed against us will be turned to our good by the Almighty. God allows persecution for two lofty purposes: one for the Church and the other for the world —

1. Purification of the Church

Following the birth of the Church on the Day of Pentecost, only the saved men and women were added to the Church (Acts 2:47b). But in course of time people embraced Christianity for various reasons. The awful result is that the unsaved outnumber the saved in many Christian congregations today.

Satan attacks the Church in two ways — one from without as a foe and the other from within as a friend. He keeps reversing his tactics. The second method is more harmful than the first. When Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome, he married the Church to the State. Many became Christians not out of conviction but for convenience. Nominalism and formalism became inevitable. If a terrorist gang with arms enters one of our Sunday Services and declares that all those who would say that Christ is the only way to Heaven would be shot dead — really — how many would be bold enough to stand firm for their faith? Persecution is God's challenge to the nominal and backslidden Christians, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him!" (1 Ki 18:21). The Church is weakened by the increase of members who believe that all roads lead to Rome.

Christ is all out to sanctify and cleanse His bridal Church that "He might present her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:25-27). The fires of persecution purify our faith which is much more precious than gold (1 Pet 1:6,7). John the Baptist illustratively explained one of the ministries of Christ like this: "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Mt 3:12).

Church history attests to the fact that God's people grow strong in prayer, worship and Bible meditation during and following times of persecution. The lukewarm Church is alerted with Christ's words: "As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. Therefore be zealous and repent" (Rev 3:19).

Disunity among Christians is an appalling scandal. It is when storms of persecution blow vehemently against the Church, her ministers and members realize that they are not the enemies of each other but the real enemies are the opposers of her Lord and His cause. To the seven oneness factors of Ephesians 4:4-6 like "one Lord" and "one Father," she adds "one Enemy!" Here breaks forth another challenge why she should stand united before the world inspite of her petty differences in doctrine and deeds.

The burning of Church buildings in the State of Gujarat in 1999 brings to our mind the passionate prayer of Psalm 74, "O God, why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?... The enemy has damaged everything in the sanctuary ... They have burned up all the meeting places of God in the land" (vv1,3,8). There's a shameful confession tucked in this Psalm: "We do not see our **signs**; there's no longer any **prophet**" (v9). How true this is of the Church in India today! In spite of our numerous boastful healing crusades we are yet to witness a self-advertising miracle of a well-known leper or

a lame person from our streets perfectly healed! On the face of persecution the prayer of the early Church was for signs and wonders to silence the enemies (Acts 4:29,30). There are simply too many prophets giving out predictions about personal blessings. Is there no prophet like Elijah or John the Baptist to confront kings and rulers? "O God, how long will the adversary reproach?" (Psa 74:10).

2. Propagation of the Gospel

The departing words of Christ are recorded by historian Luke in Acts 1:8, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you; and you shall be witnesses to Me... to the end of the earth." The Greek word for WITNESS has the root meaning of MARTYR. Christ anointed His disciples with the Holy Spirit in order that they might go out as bold witnesses from Jerusalem to all the distant lands of the world. But the disciples stayed back in Jerusalem rejoicing over the swelling growth of the Church (Acts 2:46,47). The only way by which God could get them out was persecution. Acts 8:1, "At that time a great persecution arose against the Church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." Whenever the Church forgets God's plan outlined in Acts 1:8, He will remind her through the rod of Acts 8:1!

Virtually 99% of the Church's human resources remains unemployed in evangelism. Many Churches are simply unions of the unemployed. They stand idle excusing themselves, "No one hired us!" (Mt 20:7). Persecution scatters them into the world of the unreached. "Those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the Word" (Acts 8:4). What's the use of salt if it is not shaken out of the salt-cellar?

Christianity is the fastest growing religion in the world, with a 6.9% growth rate, compared to 2.7% for Muslims, 2.2% for Hindus, and 1.7% for Buddhists. The enemies of the Gospel cannot remain silent observing this trend. The very first mention of the word "Church" is associated with Christ's assuring promise, "I build My Church, and the gates of Hades SHALL NOT prevail against it!" (Mt 16:18). The Church is on the offensive, and Satan on the defensive. Persecution is always a reaction. The enemies of the Gospel in the first century said concerning the Apostles, "So that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this Name!" (Acts 4:17).

The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church. Matthew Henry (1662-1714) the great Bible commentator encourages us, "God sometimes raises up many faithful ministers out of the ashes of one!" The martyrdom of Missionary Graham Stewart Staines, 58, and his sons Philip, 9, and Timothy, 6, on the night of January 22-23, 1999, in Orissa is just another corn of wheat which has fallen into the ground and died so it may produce much fruit. The Church in Orissa, which is already witnessing a phenomenal growth, in spite of the Anti-conversion Bill in force in the State, is in for the greatest harvest ever. A.W. Tozer (1897-1963) in his wisdom wrote, "The fire of God can't be damped out by the waters of man's persecution."

The Church in Tamilnadu and Kerala is perhaps the strongest in India. One secret could be that Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Christ, laboured in Kerala and was killed in Tamilnadu. How many young men and young women these two States have sent all over India as missionaries! Hear Paul speak from behind prison bars: "I want you to know, brothers, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out

for the furtherance of the gospel... Most of the brothers in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the Word without fear” (Phil 1:12-14). Let’s “Amen” it for India!

Persecution has not yet come on a full-fledged scale in the Southern States of India. Most of the top preachers, evangelists and leaders are stuck up in the South. The most strategic information that emerged from the Second All India Congress on Church Development, 1995, Chennai, is that 90% of the Christian workers are aiming at the 22%, and only 10% are working among the remaining 78% of the nation’s population. Sadhu Sundersingh (1889-1929) years ago diagnosed, “The Southern Christians are suffering from elephantiasis. Unless they move to the North, there’s no hope for India.” Praying or giving is no substitute for going. Is persecution the only language we would understand?

Having considered the two primary reasons why God allows persecution, let’s move on to look at our twofold responsibility towards the persecuted —

1. Prayer

The Bible teaches us to pray both for the persecuted and the persecutors.

a) Prayer for the Persecuted

However strong one may be in his faith on Christ, he cannot stay unmoved or undisturbed on the face of severe threats and merciless persecution. Paul who once testified to the Ephesian Church leaders that “none of these things — chains and tribulations — move me,” pleaded later with the Ephesian Christians to pray for him, that utterance might be given to him, that he might open his mouth “boldly” and preach the gospel as he ought to (Acts 20:23,24; Eph 6:19,20). When Peter was kept in prison, “constant prayer” was offered to God for him by the Church (Acts 12:5).

Thomas Brooks (1608-1680) penned, “Divine presence made the martyrs as willing to die as to dine!” God in answer to the prayer of the Church sent an angel into the prison chamber to release Peter. What our prayers can do for the persecuted at critical hours and perilous situations cannot be underestimated. When challenged before martyrdom, Polycarp replied, “Eightysix years I’ve served Christ and He never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour?” Henry Vos shamed his persecutors with the words, “If I had twin heads, they should all be off for Christ!” Tahir Iqbal, a muslim convert, before he died in a Pakistani prison in 1993, declared, “I’ll kiss the rope, but I’ll never deny my faith!” Every Christian must read Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*. The martyrs shook the powers of darkness with the irresistible power of weakness. How much the persecuted need our prayers!

In a country like India where community bindings are strong, the new converts have to continually live with oppositions and persecutions from their family folks and neighbours. Converts are not allowed to draw water from common wells, and are thrown out of the community. In virgin soils with very few Christians, finding believing spouses is another problem. Whereas communistic countries have their underground Christians, Muslim and Hindu nations have secret Christians. Let’s pray regularly for these our brothers and sisters living in fear.

b) Prayer for the Persecutors

In His very first public sermon our Master has taught us, “Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Mt 5:44). The first of His seven sayings from the Cross was a prayer for His persecutors: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Lk 23:34). Stephen the first martyr of the Church prayed aloud while bleeding under pelting of stones, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin” (Acts 7:60).

It’s repeatedly observed in mission fields that the malignant opponents get powerfully converted and become mighty exponents of the Bible. This is what our prayers for the persecutors do. Stephen’s prayer deeply impacted the young man Saul. When this persecutor of Christians became a preacher of the Gospel, people said in amazement, “Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this Name in Jerusalem?” (Acts 9:21; 22:19,20). The last prayer of William Tyndale (1494-1536) the Reformer and Bible Translator before he was strangled and burnt was, “Lord, open the eyes of the King of England!” The Lord answered his prayer, and the King authorized a Bible translation. Who has not heard of the King James Bible?

A question arises whether it is right to observe fasts and stage protests against persecution of Christians. Certain facts must be borne in mind while facing this question. People who oppose the Gospel are not the enemy; they are victims of the Enemy. In the ultimate analysis we will find that what they do is out of ignorance. Christ as well as His disciples called crucifixion an act of “ignorance” on the part of those who crucified Him (Lk 23:34; Acts 3:17). It’s the same in every generation because the blindness is caused by the “god of this world” who only becomes more and more active as years pass by (1 Thess 2:14b-16).

The spiritual warfare passage in Ephesians 6 is essentially about missionary struggle. The *shoes* speak about the ever-readiness to go forth for the proclamation of the Gospel. The *sword* is our message, the Word of God. This passage, which ends up with a plea for missionary prayer, begins as, “We do NOT wrestle against flesh and blood” (Eph 6:12-20). Any attack on the Church must primarily be discerned as the direct activity of wicked spirits. Spiritual powers cannot be combated by numerical or physical strength. Presentation of our grievances to the leaders of the Nation and protest marches with Christian dignity have their place. But fasting prayers in secret are more effective than protest fasts in public. Restudying of the Acts of the Apostles will keep us in the right perspective.

When the Church agonizes under persecution, the Lord of the Church laughs at the persecutors. This is our enormous encouragement. Only three times in the Bible do we read of God’s laughing (Psa 2:4; 37:13; 59:8). The context is always rebellion against Him either as nations or individuals, and the overthrow of evil.

Our next responsibility is to identify with the sufferers —

2. Participation

No other analogy so beautifully illustrates the unity of the Church like “the Body.” Whether it is the local Body of Christ or the universal Body of Christ, if one member suffers, all the members should suffer with it (1 Cor 12:26). The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews appealed, “Remember the prisoners as if chained with them, and those who are mistreated, since you yourselves are in the body also” (Heb 13:3). Identifying with

the persecuted is inseparable from our stewardship of the gospel. Standing with the persecuted Christians means standing with Christ. At the final judgment the King would say to those on His right hand, "I was in prison and you came to Me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me" (Mt 25:34,36,40).

Get in touch with missionary organisations and visit persecuted congregations to encourage them in the Lord. Let them know they are not alone. Apostle Peter's reminder to the persecuted Christians of his day is helpful: "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you... The same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world" (1 Pet 4:12; 5:9). Write personal letters to encourage persecuted missionaries working in remote places. The imprisoned missionary Paul thankfully acknowledged how he was encouraged by some Christians: "The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very diligently and found me" (2 Tim 1:16,17). There are so "many ways" we can participate in the sufferings of the persecuted if only we have the mind (v 18).

Indifference towards the persecuted Christians is a sin against God. Beware of getting your eyes clouded by the thrilling worship services and rich blessings you enjoy in your local Church! "Woe to you who are at ease in Zion... who chant to the sound of stringed instruments, and invent for themselves musical instruments like David... but are not grieved for the affliction of (their brother) Joseph" (Am 6:1,5,6).

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Crowning rewards await those who suffer for the Name of Christ and His Gospel. Towards the end of his missionary career, Paul testified, "I suffer trouble as an evil doer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained... This is a faithful saying: If we died with Him, we shall also live with Him. If we endure, we shall also reign with Him" (2 Tim 2:9,11,12). Of those who had such buoyant hope it is said that they were "tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection" (Heb 11:35). The driving force for these heroes of faith was: "If Christ has died for me, no sacrifice of mine can be too great!"

Eventhough it is our duty to pray for and bless those who persecute us, God will judge them unless they repent. The Book of Revelation tells us: "Rejoice over Babylon, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!... In her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and all who were slain on the earth" (Rev 18:20,24).

All may not be called to be martyrs. But in the words of Watchman Nee (1903-1972) who was tortured in communist China, "We must have a mind to suffer!" Because, we are called "not only to believe on Christ, but also to suffer for His sake!" (Phil 1:29)