

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 fueled 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 honor 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.

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