

## HORRIFIED AND FASCINATED:

### *A Biblical Meditation on Persecution & Martyrdom*

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**H**orror and fascination. Throughout the Christian era, Christians have been both horrified and fascinated by persecution on account of faith and, especially, death for the sake of faith. The horror is natural enough, for real persecution seeks to destroy all that a person holds dear — personal security, trustworthy friendships, the intimacy of family, the nurture of community, valued possessions — in order to destroy what one may feel is most valuable of all, that pearl of great price which is one's relationship with God in Christ and one's witness to the gospel in the world. The prospect of being forced to choose between one's faith and all else that one holds dear is terrifying. Hence the horror.

At the same time, Christians have been fascinated by persecution and martyrdom. Even as we are horrified by the evil that persecution represents, our imaginations and meditations have for millennia circled around instances of persecution and martyrdom, seemingly fixated on the events that horrify us. The picture of Christians being thrown to lions in the Roman stadiums is known so universally that it has become an archetype of conviction persevering in the face of the most terrifying threats. Apply the verbal metaphor of "being thrown to the lions" to anything — whether the politics of your local school board or the situation of Christians in a Pakistani village — and people immediately know what tradition you are drawing on. How vividly I remember "Uncle Willie and the Water Torture," the story my 4th-grade Sunday School teacher read us about a missionary suffering during the early days of the Communists in China. My young imagination filled in all the details, and my young mind thought long about it: "Was Uncle Willie ever tempted to break down? How was it that the water dripping on his head made him feel like he was going mad? What



*The Rev. Dr. Titus Presler and Bishop Mano Rumalshah reflect on 'moments of truth' that suffering brings*

would I have done? Would I have broken down, and, if so, when?"

As for the central martyrdom of our faith, the death of Jesus, listen to the account that the abbess Egeria gives of the emotions of the crowds gathered for the Three Hours on Good Friday in Jerusalem in the late fourth century: "At each reading and at every prayer, it is astonishing how much emotion and groaning there is from all the people. There is no one, young or old, who on this day does not sob more than can be imagined for the whole three hours, because the Lord suffered all this for us." That groaning and sobbing — they testify that the events of the Passion engage the whole of our being, not simply our theological minds or our contemplative spirits — and they bring us to an existential crux. That fascination with the Passion has been extended to persecution and martyrdom as a general phenomenon in Christian history.

At the heart of our fascination is this, I believe: Persecution offers truth. It offers truth about God, about the holiness of God, the value of God, the demands of God, the mercy of God,



the mystery of God. Persecution offers truth about the world, about its dynamics, its structures, its power, about the power of evil in the world. Persecution offers truth about the gospel, about its nature, its dynamism, its paradoxes, its terror. And finally, persecution offers us truth about ourselves, about who we really are, about our values, our priorities, our loyalties, our strength, our dark side. Testing runs through all of this, for we suspect that do not know the truth entirely until we and all we believe have been tested. Persecution tests God. It tests the world. It tests the gospel. It tests us. Like all tests — whether medical, scientific, athletic or academic — this test offers truth.

As I have moved more deeply into the topic of persecution and martyrdom, I have been struck by both the depth and extent of what Scripture offers us, for we find that persecution and death on account of faith are endemic in the biblical record. Scripture, of course, brings revelation, history and theology to an intersection. My own training is in New Testament as well as in missiology, so the major burden of this talk is a discussion of persecution and martyrdom in Scripture.

### Old Testament Indications

When turning to Scripture, it is natural for us to focus on the New Testament, but I begin by highlighting just a few interesting precedents in the Old Testament: Abel, the Exodus, the Exile, and Daniel and his companions.

The killing of Abel by his brother Cain because Abel's sacrifice was more acceptable to God is the first instance in the biblical record of violence and death occasioned by a point of religious belief and practice. We also intuit in it the ambiguities of motive and content that are present in virtually all instances of persecution and martyrdom. How did the faith of Cain and Abel really differ? To what degree was Cain's act motivated by sibling rivalry or sheer envy? Did Abel bring on his own demise by boasting of God's favor or humiliating his brother in ways not included in the biblical story? These are questions likely to emerge very soon in the ordinary parish Bible study, and they illustrate the com-

plexity and ambiguity that has always attended reflection on persecution and martyrdom. Note one further point of contact: The story established in the primordial religious history of Judaism and Christianity the principle of sacrifice, the offering of life, in particular, blood, for the sake of reconciling a relationship, a principle crucial in the reconciliation worked by Christ on his cross of martyrdom. In the end, Abel, like the early Christians, was baptized, as it were, with his own blood. Jesus actually cites Abel as the first righteous one whose blood was shed on earth (Mt. 23.35).<sup>1</sup>

The slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt is depicted in the second book of the Pentateuch as an economic and demographic expedient adopted by the Egyptians, but notice that when Moses demands their liberation by Pharaoh, what he demands is permission for the Hebrews to leave Egypt *in order to sacrifice to their God upon God's holy mountain, Horeb*: "Thus says the LORD: Let my people go, so that they may worship me.' ... We must go a three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to the LORD our God as he commands us." We realize that this is not the full extent of Moses' demand, for we have already heard God say at the burning bush, "I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey," and we suspect that Pharaoh realizes this, too. Yet it is striking that *religious freedom* for the worship of Yahweh is the substance of Moses' public demand in connection with what became the Exodus, the great foundational event in God's history of salvation with the Chosen People.

It would be interesting to hear an ancient Canaanite reflect on religious freedom during the period of the Hebrew conquest of Canaan. Did the Canaanites experience the conquest as a fundamentally *religious* conflict with Yahweh? Did they feel they were the victims of religious persecution? Or did they experience the conquest as simply another series of tribal wars, a series they were gradually losing? We don't know. They didn't survive to tell their side of this



story. What we know of the story gives us pause, and we wonder, even as we accept the Hebrews' destiny in the land God promised them. This dimension of the biblical story also reminds us that religious toleration is a relatively recent development within Christian history, where Christian conviction was long wed to the political convictions that the religion of the state must be the religion of the ruler and that the duty of the state was to enforce the religion of the ruler.

Theological reflection in the Old Testament about the reversals that God's People suffer at the hands of the heathen is ambiguous. On the one hand, the heathen are God's enemies, and the advance of their cause is always an offense against God. In Psalm 2, the psalmist asks incredulously and resentfully, "Why do the kings of the earth rise up in revolt, and the princes plot together, against the Lord and against his Anointed?" (Ps. 2.2). On the other hand, the victory of Israel's enemies is often interpreted, both by the author of Chronicles and by the prophets, as punishment for Israel's own unfaithfulness in following God. In predicting the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah quotes God saying, "I will pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in forsaking me, in burning incense to other gods and in worshipping what their hands have made" (Jer. 1.16). The misfortune of Israel as a whole is not conceptualized as religious persecution. Rather, military setbacks for Israel and Judah, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the period of exile in Babylon are the political consequences that God permits on account of the people's own religious infidelity. They are urged to learn from their mistakes and to emerge from their sufferings as a more faithful people.

At the individual level, however, the saga of Daniel and his companion exiles in Babylon is an archetype of the faithful followers of God who are persecuted for their faith by those who do not follow the true God. Daniel knows that he alone will be able to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dream and that therefore he and his friends will be spared the execution being prepared for all religious diviners. Significantly, however, he makes a stand for reli-

gious toleration when he urges the king to spare also the various Chaldean diviners who could not divine and interpret his dream. The dream itself, a vision of the deified ruler having feet of clay, is an image of the folly of all state power that arrogates to itself quasi-divine authority and a prediction of its ultimate downfall. Nebuchadnezzar learns nothing from it, however, for he soon erects a golden statue for which he demands universal worship. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego stand firm in their faith, and when they are thrown into the fiery furnace, they survive miraculously in the company of a fourth figure who has the appearance of a god. This fourth figure, I suggest, embodies a newer notion that God actually accompanies God's followers through their sufferings for God's sake. The king responds by tolerating greater religious pluralism, but, ironically, he enforces this pluralism with severe sanctions: "Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that utters blasphemy against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins; for there is no other god who is able to deliver in this way."

Daniel's overnight stay in the lion's den under King Darius is one of the most dramatic instances of perseverance in faith in the face of state threat. Notice, however, that the religious conflict in this instance was artificially generated and thus bogus in its origins. The king's plan to appoint Daniel over all the satraps and presidents of the kingdom aroused their envy. Out of their envy they said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God." Out of sheer political competition they cooked up the short-lived decree that all should worship none but the king for 30 days.

So in the Old Testament, I highlight the first martyrdom of Abel, the religious freedom demanded by Moses, the radical religious intolerance implicit in the conquest of Canaan, punishment as an interpretation of Israel's misfortunes, and the theme of perseverance in the story of Daniel, to whom could be added Elijah, Jeremiah, Esther and a host of others. The



Suffering Servant theme in Isaiah, of course, is the great bridge to Jesus, to whom we now turn.

### New Testament Indications

In the New Testament we enter the most familiar ground of persecution and martyrdom — through the life and teaching of Jesus, through his dying a persecuted martyr's death, and through the experience and theology of the early Christian communities.

The gospels depict Jesus being opposed during his ministry, but he is not described as being constantly persecuted, although he does narrowly escape from being stoned at Nazareth. With so many people flocking to him, his opponents had to work behind the scenes to prepare one final coup de grace.

Among the various predictions Jesus makes of his own demise, however, there is one that stands out in stressing that Jesus saw his coming persecution and death as part of a long pattern of treatment for God's prophets, as the result of his deliberate prophetic challenge to established power, and as part of an eschatological, or end-of-time, climax in God's plan: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! ... I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Mt. 23.37, 39). This prediction comes at the end of the woes in Matthew 23, when Jesus in the strongest terms condemns scribes and Pharisees both for religious hypocrisy and for their economic oppression of the poor. Jesus' central proclamation of the Kingdom of God challenged the oppressive powers of the world and thereby invited a fundamental conflict that went well beyond differences of opinion about purely spiritual matters. From this conflict arose the sense of inevitability that pervades the suffering and death of Jesus.

In Holy Week, we were all very recently immersed in the Passion story. As a matter of faith, we affirm that Jesus died to reconcile humanity with God, that his death catalyzed a cosmic shift. Provocative for our thinking here,

though, is the fact that people have always puzzled over the social, political and religious dimensions of Jesus' final conflict: Was Jesus' quarrel with Jewish religious authorities really so severe as to prompt a cry for death? If so, what was really the nub of their complaint — blasphemy, competition for the people's loyalty or a perceived threat to the temple establishment? Did the Romans execute Jesus just to get the temple leaders off their back? Or were there some independent motivations: suppression of an apparently popular movement, Pilate's own insecurity as governor or a threat to imperial authority? And Judas: Did he intend to engineer Jesus' death, or did he hope only to force Jesus to lead a public liberation movement? I will not try to answer these questions here. I mention them simply to make two points. First, these are natural, legitimate questions that have been raised now for close to 20 centuries. Second, they highlight the fact that the ambiguity about motivations and machinations that arises throughout the history of the persecution of Christians surrounds even the death that is pivotal in our faith, the death of Jesus. In other words, it is not that Jesus' death is somehow a pure instance of martyrdom and that all other martyrdoms are, by comparison, complex, hard to figure out, ambiguous, not quite the real thing. No, persecution and martyrdom have always been complex and ambiguous, and that includes the death of Jesus.

Christians under pressure have always taken comfort in the fact that Jesus *predicted* that his followers would suffer for the sake of the gospel and that he promised them blessing in that suffering. The quintessential instance of this is the Beatitudes, where, after blessing the poor (or the poor in spirit, in Matthew), the hungry and the grieving (and then, in Matthew, the merciful, the peacemakers and the pure in heart), Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their forebears did to the prophets." We have heard this teaching so many hundreds, even



thousands of times that we take it for granted, but let's look at just how remarkable it is.

First, the notion of being blessed by being hated, reviled and excluded reversed a prominent theme in the old covenant, that misfortune was a sign of God's disfavor, even curse, and prosperity a sign of God's blessing. Jesus in his movement reached out to people whose condition was seen as a sign of curse and said to them, "No, your poverty, your mourning, your hunger is not a sign of God's curse. Rather, the yearning for God you demonstrate by being here invites God's blessing, and you are blessed in spite of your poverty, in the midst of your poverty, perhaps even through your poverty." Persecution, likewise, is not a sign of God's curse, but, evidently, a circumstance that catalyzes God's blessing. Let me add that Jesus' teaching reverses not only a prominent Old Testament theme but an assumption of common sense. There are doubtless some here who are financially fragile on account of your commitment to gospel work. My experience is that that feels not like a blessing but like a distracting hassle that threatens much that we hold dear. There are doubtless some here who live with real griefs in your gospel work. My guess is that those griefs feel not like blessings but like debilitating black holes. But blessed are you, says Jesus. Easy to understand? No. Paradoxical? Yes.

Second, persecution is predicted as part of the landscape of receiving the gospel and inviting the Kingdom of God. Jesus says not, "Blessed are you *if* people hate you and exclude and revile you ..." but "*when*" they do all these things. Jesus takes for granted that there will be persecution. He is putting us on notice that persecution for the gospel is neither an anomaly, nor an exception, nor, perhaps, even an outrage. It is, shall we say, part of the deal.

Third: *Why* is it to be expected? We are to expect it because the gospel is inherently conflictual: It causes conflict; its power arouses other powers, which rise up to oppose it and suppress it. Why does the gospel cause such conflict? In the gospel of Jesus, God proposes to make a real difference both in people's lives and in the life of

the world, but God proposes to do it without being coopted by the powers of the world. The Kingdom of God is a separate and superior sovereignty. Powers in the world — whether social, or economic or political — will be happy with the gospel so long as its official representatives give a deferential nod in their direction and acknowledge their lead. The gospel itself, however, can never be so subverted, and when it is proclaimed as such, it always provokes opposition that has the potential to spawn persecution. Notice that the grand legacy Jesus says his persecuted followers will be joining is not a history of priests or judges, but a history of prophets. Prophecy provokes persecution. Prophecy is at the heart of the real gospel.

Finally, Jesus does promise a heavenly reward for the persecuted. Yes, indeed, that is pie in the sky by-and-by, whatever your favorite pie might be at the eternal eucharistic and messianic banquet of intimacy with God that Jesus foresees for us all in heaven. But Jesus' perspective is *both-and*, not *either-or*. He was passionately and prophetically committed to transforming life for his poor, hungry and grieving followers in the here and now, so he was not at all ashamed to assure them that when persecution came they could not *necessarily* expect reward and vindication in the here and now, but they could be assured of it in God's eternal glory.

Jesus says many other things about persecution for his followers — as disciples they must bear their cross, they must not be ashamed of confessing his name, persecution will accompany the end-time struggle, and so on — but they all proceed from these four premises in the beatitude: the gospel is conflictual, persecution is inevitable, God turns curse into blessing and the persecuted have an eternal reward.

Jesus' predictions that his followers would be persecuted were fulfilled very soon. Almost immediately upon the Ascension, the earliest Christians, their communities and their missionaries experienced persecution and sometimes martyrdom. This experience helps account for why we have so many persecution predictions from Jesus: Because those sayings of



his meant so much to his suffering followers, many of them were included among the gospels.

But first a word about the word "martyr." At the Ascension, in Luke's account, Jesus says to his disciples: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1.8). Back of that English word "witness" is the Greek word *martura*, and it was early applied especially to being a witness to Jesus' resurrection; that was one of the criteria for choosing a successor to Judas. Beyond the New Testament period, it came to be reserved for those who had undergone hardship for the faith, and then its use was restricted to those who had suffered death for the faith. Remember, though, that the root meaning of martyrdom is witness — witness to the truth of who Jesus is, what the world is like and what it means to be a believer.

Many of the earliest Christians lived with persecution of various kinds, from Stephen the martyr to John the Divine on the island of Patmos. In the rich New Testament literature, I highlight a few specific events and reflections that fill out the biblical stance on persecution.

First, persecution spurred the first mission expansion of the church. After the death of Stephen, Luke tells us, "a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8.1). That is not always a result of persecution, but it can be part of that dynamic celebrated by Tertullian, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

Second, the Suffering Servant theme in Isaiah's prophecy was probably crucial in helping the church understand both the meaning of Jesus' death and its own experience of persecution. What's the passage Philip discusses with the Ethiopian? "As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is mute, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him" and so on (Isaiah 53.7-8). The Suffering Servant, who was probably also central in Jesus' self-understanding, helped the church understand that suffering could be a channel of

God's redeeming movement in the world.

Third, the witness of joy and community in the midst of persecution was magnetic, as it continues to be today. Perhaps the most vivid instance of this is the story of Paul and Silas singing and praying in the jail at Philippi. First the prisoners are drawn to their witness, then the jailer is saved, both physically and spiritually, along with his family as he finds his soul compelled by the faith, joy and kindness of his persecuted captives. This seems to be the story of Christians in the southern Sudan today, as it has been in countless other times and places.

Fourth, persecution offers a mystical communion with the suffering of Jesus. Writing to the Philippians, Paul says, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse ... in order that I may know Christ and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3.8-11). To the Galatians, Paul says, "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6.17). Here is a crucial dimension in the Christian understanding of persecution: Historically, not just Paul, but millions of Christians, have found that suffering for the gospel brings them closer to Jesus and closer to Jesus' own suffering. And for millions of others who are not persecuted, the witness of the persecuted and martyred brings them closer vicariously to Jesus and his suffering. There is an irony here: Jesus came and shared our suffering, suffering and dying once for all — so whence this thirst for mystical union with Jesus' sufferings? As I said at the outset, persecution offers truth. As we enter more deeply into the experience of Jesus, we discover not only who God is but also who and what we really are. In entering the suffering of Jesus, we understand our own suffering, sometimes for the first time, and are able to receive God in that suffering in ways we never have before. This can be true for entire peoples as well; that is why it is so important for cultural groups to celebrate their own martyrs — the martyrs of Uganda, the martyrs



of Japan, Martin Luther King Jr., and so on. In these commemorations entire peoples experience the suffering of Jesus come close, bonded with their own experience as a people. Until 1969 the Roman Catholic Church required that relics of martyrs be contained in every consecrated altar. I suspect that the source of that custom was a yearning for a visible link between the suffering of the people and the suffering of Christ, which is lifted high in the liturgy of the Eucharist, which is focused on the altar.

Fifth, persecution issues a call to community. If the vision of mystical union with Christ through suffering can threaten to engulf the Church with a cult of persecution and martyrdom — and that has happened sometimes in Christian history — the horror of persecution dispels romantic pretense and calls us to solidarity in the Body of Christ. Paul frequently expressed gratitude to those who had prayed for him and ministered to him in his imprisonments and other suffering. The collection he was taking up for the saints in Jerusalem may have been prompted partly by hardships brought on by persecution. The collection was significant beyond its practical effect, however. As a missionary to Gentiles, a vocation that was controversial within Jewish Christian circles, Paul was passionately committed to demonstrating solidarity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The collection was to be a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual unity of all Christians in the Body of Christ. So also, the persecutions of our own day call us to solidarity with suffering Christians in all places, across all boundaries of geography, race, ethnicity, language and socioeconomic status. This issue of solidarity is similar to what Paul was addressing in the celebration of the Eucharist at Corinth, where the rich were going ahead at the agape meal and eating without sharing with the poor who had nothing to eat. “When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat,” he remonstrates. “Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor. 11.20, 29). That body that must be discerned is not so much the

physical bread; rather, Paul means primarily the community of people gathered. If we presume to celebrate Eucharist but fail to be in solidarity with the suffering people of God, we have failed to discern truly the Body of Christ, and our eucharistic celebration is empty. This is intimately related to Jesus’ teaching: “As you fed, clothed and visited the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me” (Mt. 25).

Finally, what sustains the people of God in persecution is the confidence that, in Christ, God has already accomplished the victory over the power of evil and death. As Jesus says to his disciples in the Gospel of John, “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (John 16.33). The entire Revelation to John the Divine is based on that conviction. John was sharing his vision with a community of people facing ferocious persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian near the end of the first century. All those visions of the glory of heaven, the saints presented before the throne with their garments washed in the blood of the Lamb, the vivid depictions of world conflict — they are premised on one conviction: Behind all appearances of desolation and defeat, a cosmic struggle is underway, and in that struggle God has already won the pivotal victory in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. On account of that victory, Christians need have no doubt about the final victory of God in the overall struggle. We are bound for glory!

### Summary

Horror and fascination have always been hallmarks of the Christian stance toward persecution and martyrdom. Indeed, we see that combination in the Passion narratives of the gospels themselves, where the events of Jesus’ last week, and then the suffering of the last 24 hours of his life, take up a vastly disproportionate share of the gospels’ length. Persecution and martyrdom, whether actually experienced or whether contemplated from afar, bring Christian biography and Christian community to moments of truth, where Christians experience the truth of God, the truth of the world, the truth of the gospel,



the truth of themselves. Those moments are vivid, those moments are revealing.

I have tried to say a great deal about persecution and martyrdom. What I highlight in summary is this. The gospel is a proclamation of the Kingdom of God. That gospel is inherently conflictual in that it challenges the world and its powers with the truth of the inbreaking Kingdom of God. That challenge inevitably prompts persecution, with all its attendant suffering. The challenge of the Kingdom is important enough that God was willing to suffer for it in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The community that follows in the way of the gospel, the way of the Kingdom, inevitably experiences the suffering of persecution, and in that experience Christians discover a special solidarity with the suffering of

their Savior, who suffered for them. One of the anguishes of persecution is that the basis of the persecution is often obscured by other issues that prompt other charges, so that one's witness is often dismissed. Yet for those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the presence of Christ radiates forth. The story of God in Christ is one story extending through the lives of all Christians in all times and places. Christians and their communities are one body, living out the life of Christ in the world. Thus the suffering of one is the suffering of all. The suffering of one is the suffering of Christ. The suffering of one, many, or any calls us to hear the cry deeply with us. It calls us to live in solidarity, to work for the relief of the saints, that the Body of Christ may be healed and whole in the world. ☩