

UNDERSTANDING PERSECUTION

Recalibrating a theology of suffering with the reality of Easter

By Mike Burnard



The Easter season of 2019 saw a wide range of news reports in which Christians made the headlines. These included an Australian rugby hero being accused of “intolerant gay remarks”, churches being attacked in Sri Lanka, Fulani militants attacking a group of Christians in Nigeria, Christians being accused of blasphemy in Pakistan, and freedom of religion facing attack in South Africa, among others. In the Christian media, most of these reports were classified under the banner of “**CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION**”.

The inflicting of suffering, harassment, imprisonment, fear or pain are all components of persecution, but there is a danger in classifying all forms of opposition as “persecution”. This can create a victim

mentality, which has sadly become quite common among Western Christians. Jesus never saw Himself as ‘persecuted’, nor as a victim. Neither did believers in the early Church. The apostles saw their severe suffering as a privilege (being able to “share in the suffering of Christ”) and as a “joy set before them” (Hebrews 12:2). The most amazing experience, for me personally, is that in more than 35 years of serving the Church in restricted areas, I cannot remember one incident when persecuted believers saw themselves as being victims of persecution. It was ‘normal Christianity’ to those we met in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and South East Asia, and an absolute joy to share the cross of Christ.

One specific incident involved Pastor Labib Madanat, who served as Executive Secretary of the Palestinian Bible Society. After an attack on the Bible Society in 2006, he said the following: *“Death – we have to face it, one day or another. It is inescapable. But the sting of death has been broken by the cross of Jesus, by the love of Jesus Christ. I know it is very difficult for the Church worldwide to see other Christian believers being harassed, threatened and persecuted. And out of this concern they want to be involved. They want to come to the rescue of the family. And this is wonderful because this is the spirit of the fellowship. BUT we need to be careful. Do not rob us of the courage which Christ gives us. Stand with us to grow even stronger and stronger in this courage. Refrain from any act which might look like strengthening any trace of self-pity. Do not highlight the Muslims as the enemies. Muslims are not our enemies; they are our beloved. Do not let Satan define your vision. Let the love in Christ define your vision. Again, we are not naïve, but this is what we are called for.”*

Referring to all opposition as persecution is unbiblical and nullifies the cross of Christ. Paul had one desire: “... to know Christ—yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death” (Philippians 3:10). Paul never saw himself as a victim of a hostile society. He never sought pity and would probably have been offended by the modern Church for bemoaning those that inflicted his suffering. He understood the necessity of not only believing in Jesus but also to suffer for Him.

Philippians 1:29 “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him...”

Colossians 1:24 “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you...”

Philippians 2:17 “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.”

Easter is not only a time to call to remembrance the sacrifice of a crucified Christ, but also a time to ‘recalibrate’ what we as Christians define as the cornerstone of discipleship – denying oneself, taking up our cross and following Him.

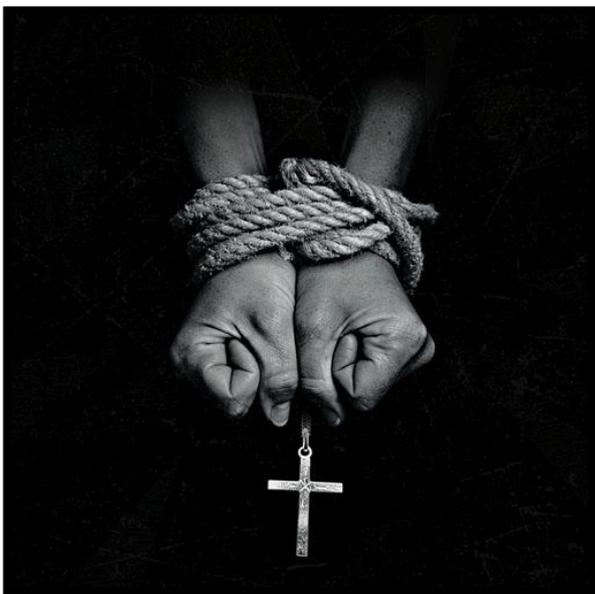
This 'calling' of discipleship is never more brutally exposed than during Easter. Over 2,000 years of freedom, modernisation, compromise and a quest for democracy, this principle was theologised into a message of sacrificing comforts rather than sacrificing self. But with every Easter celebration, the Church is reminded anew that without the cross, there will be no crown. This remains the object of calibration and is central to the Gospel of salvation.

The modern Western Church sadly created new definitions of old truths in order to remain as 'Biblically true' as possible in a sacrifice-free, comfortable and risk-free society. We didn't change the Gospel, but we altered the 'point of calibration'. The message of the cross was shifted to others within the body of Christ in order for all to feel part of the cross-bearing definition of being a disciple. The 'persecuted Church' became the answer that allows us to lead a guilt-free life of comfort. We embrace persecution without feeling the pain. We confess to being part of the body in pain while living a painless religion. We revert to testimonies of those who were martyred to explain the reality of 'our persecution', without ever feeling the pain and shame of imprisonment and the fear of death. Anybody who faced opposition became a symbol of 'our suffering' and indicated how we are 'sharing' in the cross of Christ. "We are Charlie Hebdo" became a global cry after the Paris attacks in 2015. "We are Sri Lanka" appeared on Facebook posts after the recent bombings in Colombo. The reality is that we are NOT Sri Lanka. Most Westerners have no understanding of the pain and suffering of losing a loved one in a terror attack. The attacks cost us nothing except the discomfort of seeing the destruction on our TV screens.

In order not to lose the Biblical mandate of embracing 'our cross', we created new definitions for persecution. Losing comforts or feeling marginalised became new characterisations of sacrifice for many Christians in the West and 'persecution' became a new trend or status symbol, no longer the shame that the early Church endured. After all, sacrifice is a wonderful virtue – in the life of someone else.

Celebrities and sports personalities are elevated to "spiritual heroes" overnight for being "persecuted for their faith" after posting religious convictions on social media. Still keeping their freedom, their families, their safety and the millions they owned, they become the new norm for calibrating sacrifice.

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF PERSECUTION



The Christian faith, unlike others, was – and is – built on the platform of weakness. And, to reinforce the platform of weakness, God put certain structures in place to ensure sustained dependency and vulnerability. These virtues are not only accentuated through suffering and persecution, but also solidified. Christianity was a religion like no other, built on "strength in weakness" and "wisdom in foolishness". Because the earth wasn't their home, the early Christians could say without reservation, like Paul, that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

Much of what Jesus taught became the DNA of the early Church. It was not only a theology of denying yourself and taking up your cross theoretically; it was a daily exercise. Not only did the early believers teach and preach Jesus during the first several hundred years after His death and resurrection, they lived lives that reflected their teachings. The apostles never saw themselves as the 'persecuted Church'. They saw

themselves as 'the Church'. Persecution was not something that elevated one disciple above another or indicated a deeper level of 'follow-ship' – it was simply normal Christianity. As a matter of fact, when the beheading of James was reported in Acts 12, only one verse was dedicated to his martyrdom. It was the theology of the first century and not something that needed to be elaborated.

As long as those who followed Jesus understood that they were on the bottom and the edge of society, and as long as they shared the rejected and betrayed status of Jesus, they could grasp His teaching more readily. Persecution became the 'true north' towards which could calibrate their faith. Principles of 'loving your enemy' could only fully be understood when they were persecuted; values like forgiveness came into practice when they were wronged and imprisoned; teachings like 'love for the enemy' only took root when they were despised by others; and philosophies

like 'living in harmony with one another' could be more easily practised when they were gathering secretly in the catacombs. Because of their position in society, their faith was untouched by empire, corruption, greed and compromise. They had nothing to lose and nothing to prove. Their strength lay in their weakness and their relevance in their irrelevance. They served from the bottom up.

Looking at the lives of the apostles, we find that martyrdom was a calling that applied to almost all of them. It was not a specific group of people that was persecuted – it was normal Christianity for all of them. And while the Bible does not expressly give details about the ways in which all the apostles died, we know much from the early Church historians. Let's examine the historical evidence of how these men died (as explained by Jack Wellman¹):

- **How the Apostle Peter died**

Peter was crucified, but he thought himself unworthy of the same type of death that Jesus suffered, so he asked to be hung upside down as was done in Rome.

- **How the Apostle Andrew died**

Andrew was also crucified, but on an x-shaped cross in Greece. The fact that he was in Greece may mean that he was participating in the Great Commission and taking the Gospel to the 'known' world.

- **How the Apostle Matthew died**

Like most of the apostles late in their lives, Matthew became a missionary and was arrested in Ethiopia. It was there that he was staked or impaled to the earth by spears and then beheaded.

- **How the Apostle Bartholomew (or Nathaniel) died**

Bartholomew (Nathaniel) was martyred in Armenia, where he was flayed to death by whip. He, too, must have been taking the Good News into that part of the world.

- **How the Apostle Thomas died**

Not very much is known about the method of Thomas' execution, but he is said to have taken the Gospel as far as India, where it is claimed that he was pierced through with the spears of four soldiers.

- **How the Apostle Philip died**

According to most historians, Philip's death was exceedingly cruel. He was hung upside down from iron hooks in his ankles and left to die. Little else is known about the circumstances.

- **How the Apostle James (son of Zebedee) died**

The apostle James is not the same James as Jesus' brother. James, the brother of John, was said to have been beheaded by King Herod Agrippa near Palestine.

- **How the Apostle Jude died**

The apostle Jude, also known as Judas Thaddaeus (or Thaddaeus), is honoured together with Bartholomew by the Armenian Apostolic Church, and thus both possibly preached the Gospel there. Jude apparently made his way to Persia to preach the Gospel, and it was there that he was crucified by Magi.

- **How the Apostle Matthias died**

Matthias was the apostle that was selected to replace Judas who hung himself. He was apparently stoned and then beheaded late in the first century.

- **How the Apostle John died**

This is the disciple "whom Jesus loved" and was the only one that died a natural death – that is, of old age rather than execution. However, he was imprisoned on the island of Patmos where he wrote the Book of Revelation. It is thought that he was exiled there as a result of persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian.

- **How the Apostle James "the Less" died**

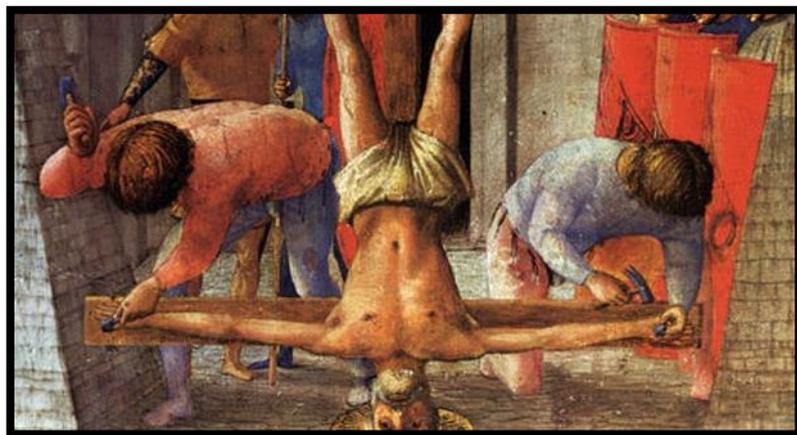
He was called James "the Less" to distinguish him from the other apostle named James and the James who was Jesus' half-brother. The Jewish historian Josephus reported that he was stoned and then clubbed to death.

- **How the Apostle Simon died**

The apostle Simon is not Simon Peter (Andrew's brother) but Simon the Zealot. Very little is known about him inside or outside of the Bible. All that is known about his death is that he was also crucified.

- **How James, the brother of Jesus died**

James was not an apostle, but he was one of the early Church leaders and the account of his death is horrific. He died while the New Testament was still being compiled. He was believed to have been thrown some 100 feet off a wall. This



¹ <https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/how-did-the-12-apostles-die-a-bible-study/#ixzz5loJz5RzH>

was done to him after he repeatedly refused to deny his faith in Jesus. After the fall, he was somehow still alive and was then beaten to death with clubs.

- **The Apostle Paul**

Most historians, both secular and Church, say that Paul was beheaded.

Nearly all the disciples died on mission trips, sharing the Gospel. They were not martyred for their convictions but because of their witness, as the Lord promised in Acts 1:8. They were not simply inconvenienced, but brutally killed.

A MODERN INTERPRETATION OF PERSECUTION

Faith tends to change with a community, more so than a community changing as a result of faith. As persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire formally came to an end in 311 AD, the Christian faith 'embarked' on a new, unexplored road of relative freedom and status. The Church now had something to lose and something to prove. In 313, Constantine (c. 272-337) legalised Christianity and it became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 AD. This new platform allowed believers to integrate into a new social order where Christianity was not only accepted but now had to be defended. The Church increasingly started serving from the top down, and slowly lost its free and alternative vantage point. And as the position of the Church changed, so the values changed as well. The theology of Christ was still in place, but the expression of faith changed for the worse. The principle of persecution was now calibrated according to acceptance and strength. The new 'barometer' of faith was comfort, security, rights and freedom. Carrying one's cross was now seen as facing discomfort, opposition or simply losing favour in a secular society. Sacrifice was still a virtue, but the interpretation changed. This form of faith was not unbiblical; just diluted. The Church now had an outward appearance of freedom, but in their endeavours to preserve what they had gained, they unknowingly sacrificed the essence of what they preached. Power invariably coalesces and corrupts.

We need to recalibrate what Christ meant when He called His disciples to a life of sacrifice and persecution, and what Paul meant when he said that EVERYBODY who desires to live a godly life will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12).

FIVE FACES OF PERSECUTION

The New Testament has various descriptions and definitions to explain the Biblical concept of persecution. In all cases, it involves acts of physical attacks and bodily harm. Persecution is generally defined as the act of harassing, oppressing, or killing people because of their witness for Christ.

- Matthew 23:34 "Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will **kill** and **crucify**; others you will **flog** in your synagogues and **pursue** from town to town."
- 2 Corinthians 11:23-24 "Are they servants of Christ? ... I am more. I have worked much harder, been in **prison** more frequently, been **flogged** more severely, and been **exposed to death** again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the **forty lashes** minus one."
- 2 Corinthians 12:10 "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in **hardships**, in **persecutions**, in **difficulties**. For when I am weak, then I am strong."
- 2 Timothy 3:10 "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, **persecutions, sufferings**—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

However, the five faces of persecution are probably best described in Revelation 2:8 in the words of God to His suffering Church in Smyrna. These are the trademarks of those who follow Christ in more than 50 nations today:

"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your (1) afflictions (oppression) and your (2) poverty – yet you are rich! I know the (3) slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in (4) prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of (5) death, and I will give you the crown of life.'"

FIVE TYPES OF PERSECUTION

There are various reasons why Christians are persecuted, and countries, regions and cultures vary in their approach to the message of salvation. It is crucial to not only understand the realities of persecution but also the types of persecution.

1. Government

Government persecution is where there are official laws that restrict and prohibit Christian activities. North Korea, China and Saudi Arabia are modern examples of government persecution where believers face imprisonment for breaking the laws when sharing the Gospel of Christ.

2. Religious

Religious persecution is where nations might be politically tolerant of Christian activities but the majority religion limits Christian activities and also discriminates against it. Most Muslim-majority countries exhibit religious persecution. Egypt, as an example, hosts the oldest Church in the world and Christians are politically part of the Egyptian society, but there are frequent attacks on churches by the religious community. Saudi Arabia, in comparison, exhibits a combination of political and religious restrictions on Christians.

3. Cultural

Cultural persecution is found in regions where there is freedom to express one's Christian faith, but the local culture makes it extremely difficult for Christians to do so. It is often linked to religious convictions and the close affinity some cultures have to a particular religion. India, for example, is the world's largest democracy with laws that guarantee freedom of religion and yet in staunch Hindu villages, Christians often suffer severe persecution. In very superstitious communities, Christians will often be accused of being responsible for floods or droughts because they angered the gods by not praying and sacrificing to them.

4. Cross-fire

Cross-fire persecution will often happen in war-zones where Christians are caught in the middle of fighting factions. In Colombia, Christians are persecuted by both drug-lords and soldiers for not joining the respective forces.

5. Family

Family persecution can happen in all countries, even those with complete political and religious freedom. South Africa has one of the most liberal constitutions with complete freedom of religion, but there are areas in Cape Town where safe-houses exist for Muslims from more radical Islamic areas who come to know Christ, and who face ostracism by family, and sometimes even death.

FIVE DEFINITIONS OF PERSECUTION

Recalibrating our understanding of persecution with the message of Easter is, in principal, quite tricky because we have to account for both the ever-changing culture and the never-changing message. Often the Church tries to calibrate Biblical principles in a world that no longer exists, and then redefines ideologies that become unbiblical. It is therefore important to distinguish between the following definitions that could so easily all be defined as PERSECUTION:

1. Facing persecution because of your faith
2. Facing persecution because of your convictions
3. Facing persecution because of your association
4. Facing opposition because of your convictions
5. Facing opposition because of your association

Here are some current examples of how these definitions get confused:



1. Facing persecution because of your faith

John Allen Chau was a 27-year-old American missionary who was killed earlier this year by unidentified individuals in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Chau had reportedly visited the Andaman and Nicobar Islands on five previous occasions and had expressed a strong desire to meet with the Sentinelese tribes to preach Christianity. He died 'in service' while preaching the Gospel. This is the Biblical understanding of martyrdom and persecution.



2. Facing persecution because of your convictions

In March 2019, Nasrin Sotoudeh, an internationally renowned human rights lawyer jailed in Iran, was handed a sentence of 38 years in prison and 148 lashes. Sotoudeh, who has represented opposition activists including women prosecuted for removing their mandatory headscarf, was arrested in June 2018 and charged with spying, spreading propaganda and insulting Iran's Supreme Leader. Sotoudeh faces this injustice not because of her faith but because of her convictions. *(This does not make it less important or less traumatic but should not be seen as persecution for her FAITH.)*



3. Facing persecution because of your association

Sadly, Christians often suffer persecution simply because of association. The bomb explosions in Sri Lanka is a classic example. Many who were killed were simply attending an Easter service. We acknowledge their choice to be in a place of worship in a nation where Christianity is not always welcomed or accepted, but these attacks were not directed specifically at those in the church because of their mission activities but solely because of their association with the Christian faith. *(Again, this does not make it less important or less traumatic, but those who were killed should not be seen as being martyred for their witness.)*



4. Facing opposition because of your convictions

Australia's rugby union authorities have issued Israel Folau, one of Australia's top rugby players, with a code of conduct breach notice over his controversial social media post which said "hell awaits" gay people. Folau posted an image on Instagram addressing "drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists and idolaters" and stating that "hell awaits [them]." Folau now runs the risk of losing his four-million Australian dollar contract. This harsh response to his post was not because of his faith – he has always enjoyed the privileges of a sport hero while being a confessing Christian – but because of his conviction. *(This does not minimise his willingness to stand up for what he believes, but should not be seen as persecution for his faith.)*



5. Facing opposition because of your association

England rugby player Billy Vunipola has been 'formally warned' by Saracens Rugby Club after defending and 'liking' Israel Folau's controversial social media post. "The player has been formally warned about his future conduct," said Saracens in a statement after "lengthy discussions" between Vunipola and club representatives. The opposition Vunipola faced was not directed specifically at him for being a Christian, but because of his association with Folau. *(Again, this does not make it less important or traumatic, but should not be seen as persecution for his faith.)*

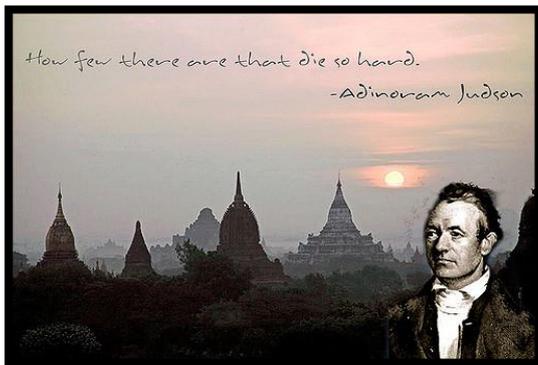
CONCLUSION

Definitions in a topic of this magnitude might seem to be very superficial and semantic, and run the risk of elevating one sacrifice above another, but "suffering for the sake of Christ" remains a cornerstone of the Christian faith and therefore needs to be fully explored and understood. Once we water down the impact of the cross, we lose the value of our salvation.

In 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul gives a full explanation of the nature of his trials and encourages the Church not to be "uninformed and ignorant about the troubles they experienced in the province of Asia". The trend that Paul is trying to combat is the Church becoming ignorant of the cross of Christ being displayed through the body of Christ to the ends of the earth. Christ was not 'inconvenienced' when He died on the cross, and we display the cross of Christ through our suffering, not through our inconveniences. When some believers in the West argue that it can be more difficult to be a 'faithful Christian' in the developed world, with all its freedoms and wealth and social opposition, than in a poor country with active persecution, it becomes deeply problematic, both theologically and ethically – it dismisses

or diminishes the actual suffering of our fellow believers and turns us into victims. This results in apathy about the suffering of the global Church and encourages us to be insular and self-obsessed. It is empirically wrong (following Christ is not normally difficult in the West) and ethically corrupt (they, not we, are being victimised and we are the ones in a position to help).

It is perhaps fitting that the 'final word' should belong to an unbelieving Burmese ruler 200 years ago:



Adoniram Judson and his wife **Ann** arrived as missionaries in Rangoon, Burma, in 1813, not knowing if they'd be executed immediately by the king, who put to death anyone he pleased on a whim. They spent six years learning the language and seven years before seeing their first convert. All three of their children died, followed by Ann. He married again and was widowed again. In total, six of his children died. The only time he went back to the US in 38 years was when his second wife was sick and needed repatriating, but she died at sea. He took 20 years to translate the Bible.

Judson spent 17 horrific months in the notorious Ava prison during the Anglo-Burmese war, suffering indescribable treatment. For the rest of his life, he bore the scars made by the chains and iron shackles which had bound him during that time. Yet upon his release, he went back to the regional authority to gain permission to resume preaching the Gospel. The scornful ruler denied his request, saying: *"My people are not fools enough to listen to anything a missionary might say, but I fear they might be impressed by your scars and turn to your religion!"* When he first arrived, nobody had ever heard the name of Jesus in the Burmese kingdom. By the time he died 7,000 had been baptised.

We are called to be a **'Good Friday' people**, not only an 'Easter Sunday' people. The idea of the sacrificial, wounded Saviour is central to Christian theology. The victim triumphs not by victimising others (like we have witnessed far too often in recent months), but rather by reflecting a wounded, crucified Christ. The testimony of freedom lies not in the fact that we are free to choose, but in the fact that we are free to become slaves of a crucified Christ, in word and in deed.

SOURCES

<https://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/how-did-the-12-apostles-die-a-bible-study/#ixzz5loJz5RzH>

<https://cac.org/a-view-from-the-bottom-2018-06-17/>

www.desiringgod.org/books/filling-up-the-afflictions-of-christ



INcontext
INTERNATIONAL

There is no copyright on this document but please acknowledge the source:

www.incontextinternational.org

mike@incontextministries.org