

Martyrdom in the Context of World Evangelization

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“Do you consider the two Korean missionaries who were killed by the Taliban in Afghanistan to be martyrs?” a colleague pointedly asked me after the incident took place. After a thoughtful moment I responded, “Yes I do.” Regardless of opinions concerning the circumstances leading up to, during and after the kidnapping of this short-term team, the two who were savagely killed can rightfully be considered martyrs of the Christian faith.

This assertion is based on what I believe to be an accurate definition of martyrdom. Although many definitions have been offered by the Church through the centuries, the most helpful definition of a martyr is succinct: *believers in Christ who lose their lives prematurely in a situation of witness as a result of human hostility.* We need to get beyond the notion that only a person who is publicly burned at the stake for refusing to renounce his faith is a true martyr.

Martyrdom is not something a person usually anticipates or to which one readily aspires. It is an experience that God in His providence bestows on select individuals for purposes ultimately known only to Him. Yet, the premature death of a follower of Christ as a result of human hostility has an enduring impact on observant believers. It causes most to pause and ponder anew the extreme cost of discipleship. It forces many to question whether they themselves measure up to the highest standard of devotion to Christ and His Cause. It motivates still others to abandon selfish plans and ambitions and turn to serve Christ in hard and difficult places. It creates a baseline for the Church from which to measure its

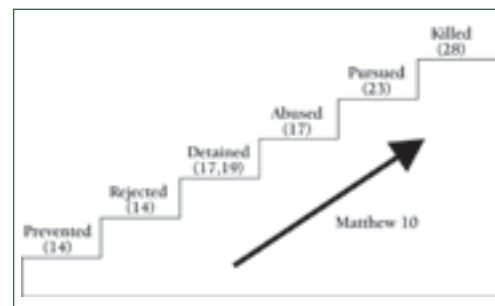
worth - whether its activities are meaningful and truly important in light of death and eternity. Martyrdom has its value.

The book *A Martyr’s Grace* (see review in this issue of *Connections*) documents the lives and deaths of twenty-one such martyrs. From 1898 to 2002, these martyrs were killed in a vast array of historical settings. From the little known “Hut Tax War” in Sierra Leone (1898), to the Boxer Rebellion in China (1900), through the bloody years of unsettled China and congruently the pioneering efforts in the Amazon basin in the 1930’s, right through World War II, to the Vietnam War and Simba Rebellion of the 1960’s, to present day unrest in the Middle East, martyrs who were on mission for Christ had their lives taken. These martyrs served as bush pilots, Bible translators, medical doctors, nurses, teachers, professors, social workers, pioneer church planters and field administrators. They were ordinary people performing ordinary mission tasks, who became caught up in extra-ordinary situations. They were people like you and me, living out their calling where God had sent them.

Place of Martyrdom in Persecution

Not all persecution is equally intense nor carries equal consequences. Believers experience various degrees of persecution, with martyrdom as the highest degree of opposition. In Matthew 10, Jesus commissioned his disciples for a mission for the first time. Before sending them out, he explicitly cautioned them that they would face varying degrees of opposition. His lesson to them can serve as a template for Christ followers of all ages.

Six phrases are used by Jesus to describe six increasingly intense hostilities that opposition can take. He begins with the least severe form, progressing in ascending order to the ultimate human hostility – martyrdom. Christ shows that His messengers could expect to be: prevented (“does not receive you,” v.14); rejected (“nor heed your words,” v.14); detained (“deliver you up,” vv. 17, 19); physically abused (“scourge you,” v. 17); pursued with intent to harm (“persecute you,” v. 23); and finally martyred (“kill the body,” v. 28).



It is instructive to note that Jesus declared opposition would come from the State (v. 18), religious leaders (v. 17) or family members (v. 21). Losing one’s life as a result of human hostility in a situation of witness is the ultimate persecution experience.

Lessons Martyrs Teach Us

Much can be learned from the deaths of martyrs to help us more clearly understand the fuller picture and implications of martyrdom.

1. *There seems to be no specific personal qualification for one to enter the ranks of martyrdom.*

A study of martyrs reveals that none of them planned or expected to die as a martyr. It is a trial that God in His providence bestows on select individuals for purposes



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ultimately known only to Him. But He is not capricious in a matter as heart wrenching as this. God's selection of those who so die may appear arbitrary at times. However, we can say with confidence that His plans are sure and purposeful in each martyr's death. The truth of Romans 8:28-30 gives perspective in this regard.

2. Great gains are realized in martyrdom.

Paul states that for the believer, "to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Gains at death are especially true for the Christian martyr. Over and over, stories recount gains that are achieved when the life of a servant of God is taken on account of Him. Gains achieved in martyrdom are best understood from three perspectives.

Gains in relation to the martyr: Ultimately, the martyr whose life has been sacrificed has reached a glorious new existence! The martyr is now in the untainted glorious presence of his Master, where "fullness of joy" and "eternal pleasures" abound (Psalm 16:11). Unimagined benefits are experienced. But beyond that, martyrs rightfully receive special recognition that will be noticed by all throughout eternity! A "crown of life" is a special emblem of honor, rewarding them for faithfulness until death (Revelation 2:10).



Gains in relation to ministries: Many times ministries initially experience a setback and even devastating loss immediately following the death of a martyr. Besides life being taken, property often is destroyed, followers scattered, and the work left in disarray. However, once the impact of the death is felt around the broader Christian community, it is not long before greater gains are realized.

In most instances more funds are given, more initiatives started and more volunteers come forward as the impact of the martyr's death makes its mark.

Gains in relation to God: God always gains when His followers lay down their lives for Him! Satan attempts to make God look bad, weak and defeated by those deaths. But God has His way of showing otherwise. God gains by showing the world the cost of the cross – demonstrating anew through His martyrs the suffering of Christ himself. He gains when Christians so moved by the martyr's example rededicate themselves to Him and to His Cause. He gains when ministries expand, bringing forth crops of new believers. But more precious, He gains when His beloved martyr is welcomed into His presence to enjoy Him forever

3. Much pain is experienced in martyrdom.

We tend to romanticize the experience of martyrdom, believing that there is nothing but triumphant victory derived from the experience. The reality of the matter is that there is a flip side to be soberly considered as well: pain and loss.

Pain in relation to the martyr. To lose one's life prematurely by human hostile action is in every instance a physically painful experience. Typically, martyrs are beheaded, stabbed, choked, shot, speared, and stoned. There are times when martyr deaths are so glamorized that the gruesomeness is too often minimized. We need to be reminded that these people suffered pain as they spilled their blood. All experienced painful deaths.

Pain in relation to loved ones left behind. Wives, husbands, children and extended family members forever feel the pain of losing their martyred loved one.

Some recover from the ordeal and use it as a means of grace and growth. Others do not and throughout life bear the scars, heartache and consequences of having their beloved taken. Disillusionment, deep spiritual struggles, broke marriages and heartache plague many surviving family members, especially children.

4. A special "Grace" seems to be extended to martyrs.

For those martyrs who have time to contemplate what is happening and see their death coming, God seems to grant a special "grace" to endure the impending ordeal. In many cases, God grants a surreal, tranquil spirit, a serenity of heart and a peaceful mind that transcends understanding. That spirit of peace leads to a genuine surrender that is derived from an overarching eternal perspective on life. An unshakable faith in something better in store for them helped many martyrs to calmly face their end.

5. In martyrdom "justice" is rarely served.

Rarely if ever are the perpetrators of the martyr's death brought to "justice." When not apprehended, neither are they jailed, tried, convicted, nor punished for their crime. Perhaps this is what further qualifies martyr's deaths as martyrdom – that the sacrifice is accepted as a non-punishable crime. After all, these individuals were proclaiming Jesus, the ultimate Forgiver, who at the event of his martyrdom could plead, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." The highest priority of missions is to engage the lost by proclaiming a forgiving Jesus, not to seek justice. Ultimately, in His time and in His way, it will be God who avenges the blood of His martyrs (Rev. 6:9-12).

6. Seeking after martyrdom is unchristian.

In a day of rampant "suicide bombers" who glorify and justify the destruction of innocent lives as an act of martyrdom, it is right to question motives. It can be categorically demonstrated from Scripture that to seek after martyrdom is a very unchristian thing to do. The intentional destruction of one's own life, by putting one's self in harms way with the intent of being killed, cloaked in the excuse that it is for the cause of Christ, is selfish, self-serving, and sinful. Those who would attempt such a course of action are out for self-glory. It is their hope that others

would applaud them for their action and thus bring a degree of admiration to themselves that they could not achieve otherwise.

7. *The martyr cannot be dishonored.*

Christian martyrs are appropriately given their due share of respect. Instead of being discredited, they are immortalized. Their example encourages Christian workers in dangerous areas and hard places to continue to persevere in their calling. To honor martyrs for providing this incentive is the right thing to do.

8. *Martyrdom as a strategy of evangelism.*

A few decades ago, major mission strategies focused on taking the Gospel to the least resistant peoples or “ripe” fields. However, in recent years that strategy has flipped-flopped. Now the focus is on reaching least reached peoples who are mostly found in highly resistant places. Consequently, we can expect more martyrs as staunchly held Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist areas are being penetrated. But God is not caught off guard by these deaths. Ultimately, they promote the advancement of world evangelization, not the curtailment of it.

9. *Martyrdom as example to local believers.*

The impact of martyr deaths on local believers where those deaths take place is immeasurable. In many instances, not only has the work expanded and adherents increased, but the resolve of local followers to remain loyal to Christ is brazened. Resolve on their part to bear up under persecution is enhanced. By example of the missionary martyr, local believers have a model to follow and a death to emulate as they in turn stand against opposition. Some of them will die as martyrs too, and will be ready to sacrifice their lives because of the sacrifice that preceded their own.

Conclusion

Martyrs speak to us by example from the grave. It becomes the responsibility of us who remain to pause and reflect on the heritage that has been passed along through their sacrificial deaths. Only then will we be prepared to endure the same kind of treatment if so granted the honor (Philippines 1:29). <<