

Whenever the topic arises amongst my friends on the theology of suffering and martyrdom, I am reminded of the life of Stephen (as recorded in The Book of Acts). Not only was he the first recorded believer who died for Christ, but his response clearly displayed character that could not have been expressed without the help of the Holy Spirit. We all need this character for the times of persecution that are to come.

Reflections on Mentoring and Suffering

A dialogue between a theology of suffering and knowing who I am in Christ

Often, we have an idealistic view of Christianity; all will/should go better the day we become a Christian. In reality, we should actually prepare ourselves for a much harder life as we are no longer only living according to fleshly desires, but according to the spirit.

Although we generally relate suffering and martyrdom to places where religious freedom is not present and to cases where people physically suffer and in many cases die for what they believe, is that truly the only type of martyrdom? What about martyrdom in countries where we do have religious freedom—the places where Christianity is known, yet peer pressure has such an impact that believers turn from the ways of God. What about situations where friends and family, caught up in traditions and methods of old, challenge us when we dare to step out of the comfort zone? The Christian challenged in this way can feel alone, an outcast under enormous pressure. Isn't that too a type of martyrdom? Isn't pressure to conform to tradition and comfort also a way of making life difficult for those who want to give all for Christ? How often have we heard people say (in word or essence): "I am glad to hear that you are now a follower of Jesus, but please don't change." They might not physically beat us, we might not physically die, but surely the pressure can cause a spiritual death or at least slow the tempo of spiritual growth.

Daily, people are physically martyred around the world. Much more needs to be done to help them and to train people to

endure physical challenges. But we also need to prepare ourselves for when the challenge is not physical. Someone once said that we should not only be prepared to die for Him, but we should also be prepared to live for Him. To die might be physical and challenging, but to live for Him, when the spiritual environment is oppressive and when even Christian friends are not as eager, might also be a type of martyrdom worth talking about.

There are thousands of Christians physically martyred around the world annually, yet many of us not living in overtly hostile areas will never even know someone who has undergone such an experience. Our martyrdom is different. For some of us, it is in our work place where we experience pressure from colleagues and business partners to secure the deal above all else. Others of us find that the rat race we are in keeps us from spending adequate time with family and even God. This dilemma is not physically forced, but bosses, deadlines and that one extra deal often adds pressure such that minimal time is left for God's Word. Still others of us face family pressure. Even though we might have grown up in a Christian family, much of what is "Christian" in our family is cultural; grandparents and parents are Christians, therefore the family members are Christians, or should we say "church-goers".

How many of our Christian friends today in school, college, or university are compelled to certain behaviours and activities just to be

part of the "in thing"? Peer pressure is growing by the day. The need for acceptance is growing faster than many of us are realising, and subconsciously, this puts pressure on us to think differently, talk differently and, eventually, behave differently.

Coming back to Stephen; we will all agree that there was something different about him, something unique, and something that draws us to be like him—not necessarily die like him, but to have his character of perseverance and understanding of who he is in Christ.

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For many years, I struggled to understand why I so often longed back to my military training days. It truly wasn't because I enjoy people shouting at me all day or being sent to run up and down the hill in full battle gear. There was something else, something I only realised much later; the discovering of my rights written in the constitution of our country. I discovered something I was prepared to stand for no matter the cost. We need to ask ourselves if we know and understand the rights we have in Christ written in the Christian constitution called the Bible? How many of us fully understand the authority given to us through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ?

In conclusion, or perhaps to begin with, "Unless we are mentored into the understanding of who we are in Christ, we will continue to fail in withstanding the suffering and martyrdom of Western society." <<