

Two Books on Suffering and Persecution

Reviewed by Samuel E. Chiang, Hong Kong

In The Shadow of The Cross. By Glenn M. Penner. *Living Sacrifice Books*, 2004; 315 pages; ISBN: 0-88264-346-0

A Martyr's Grace. By Marvin J. Newell. *Moody Publishers*, 2006. 223 pages; ISBN: 0-8024-7829-8

India, China, Iran, Sudan, Indonesia, and other hot spots of persecutions and sufferings do not dominate headlines in the news, nor are they well remembered in the life of the Church; in fact, for the Church in the West, the fervor to pray, to shoulder and uplift our colleagues, fellow pilgrims, and sisters and brothers in Christ must be rekindled.

Thus, it is appropriate that two very different books on suffering and persecution, written in this decade, speak to us in this young century. *A Martyr's Grace, Stories of Those Who Gave All for Christ and His Cause*, by Marvin J. Newell (head of CrossGlobal Link, USA), provides the theme of remembrance—we are to remember them. In contrast, Glenn M. Penner, (head of Voice of the Martyr's, Canada) has written *In The Shadow Of The Cross, a Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship*, which teaches us the theme of understanding—we are to learn about God's plan for history.

"And they might not return," is a statement we seldom hear in the church, anymore. The annual gift of 1.5 million to 2 million short-term missionaries from the USA going abroad and returning home safely has caused myopic congregations to believe that short-term missions is equal to no suffering and great "success." Our views have been

altered by the digital age with instant real-time reporting. Our sensibilities have focused on those who are "one-of-us," and we forget that the "majority world" (where most of the Christians are and residing outside of North America) is also "one-of-us." We forget that in the field of missionary service, people might not return!

With over one hundred years of data, Newell traces twenty-one former Moody Bible Institute students and the martyrdom story that God has written through them. These recognized martyrs were distributed into all continents, of varying ages, encompassed both genders, were endowed with different capacities, performed various tasks, and all were taken to glory in the line-of-duty. From the twenty-one stories, Newell distills nine sobering observations for the readers. They are all instructive.

Timing is right in this century for a biblical theology of persecution and discipleship. Banish the thought that Mr. Penner proof-texts his way for this informative and masterful volume. His tracing of conflict commences with the first three chapters of Genesis, and thus, exegetically and theologically develops the conflict that is apparent. Furthermore, he contrasts and compares both Mesopotamian and Egyptian worldviews to that of the God of the Bible—our God has a plan and intends to fulfill it. If man were to obey God and fulfill His mandate for man to have dominion over the earth, should we be surprised that there is conflict in this fallen world?

Penner starts with the word "suffering" as opposed to the word "persecution." The

biblical text speaks forth with ease and yields consistent examples where the word "suffering" is deployed to describe conflicts. The development of biblical theology allows the Old Testament text to show suffering as a result of: a) a punishment for sin; b) discipline with the purpose of training and educating; c) one's relationship with and loyalty to, the living God.

Penner does not shrink back in dealing with various theological implications of predestination and election. He deals with both in a masterful way, and this reviewer found it refreshing that the author also spoke into the Doctrine of Impassibility. Basically, this doctrine states "that God is not capable of being acted upon or affected emotionally by anything in creation." If so, and certainly both the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England and the Westminster

Confession of Faith explicitly assert that God is "without body, parts, or passions, immutable," then, it begs the question "what kind of God is He?" Does He understand us? How do we worship Him?

Choosing not to directly confront the Doctrine of Impassibility, Penner's theological arguments make a clear link to anthropomorphic metaphors (the figures of speech that are used in Scripture to describe God experiencing human-like emotions); thus, showing God had revealed Himself to man through His Son. Through the Gospels, Penner takes the reader through accounts of opposition, suffering, and the ultimate persecution of Christ.

Having established that God's plan is trustworthy (Old Testament), and God under-

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stands our sufferings (Christ in the Gospels), Penner presses on to look at persecution in the Books of Acts, and also the Teaching of the Apostles. The author also offers reasons as to why the disciples started the spread of the Gospel in Jerusalem (in contrast to Galilee, as an example). He links Jerusalem, the city, to the center of monotheistic worship, unique globally, to that of God's co-venant with mankind, in continuity as God's plan.

The choice of Jerusalem was significant, in that God did not plan it as if opposition would eventually come. No! The choice of Jerusalem meant there would be immediate resistance and danger. But God's plan intentionally focused on the not-so-easy tasks, and in utter dependence upon God, the Gospel will spread. Through careful analysis, Penner makes this significant observation: it is not so much that persecution causes church growth but that church growth and the spread of the gospel tend to cause persecution.

Newell examines the martyrs who had studied at Moody Bible Institute, and in contrast, Penner focuses on the Biblical progression of conflict, suffering, and persecution. In Newell's book the persecution that led to martyrdom was generally for religious reasons. Penner demonstrates through the biblical text that the persecution of Christians can involve religious confrontations, but may also include political, social, economical, and emotional forms of persecution.

Over two millennia worth of Church data is available to Penner to compose his thoughts, yet he seldom wanders past the seventh century, and only does so to buttress his point. The author is mindful of application of his work to the present day church and mission. He appropriately provides certain documents enabling the reader to reflectively work through discussions with

Muslims, interpretation of Psalms in the New Testament context, and various testimonies from the saints of the last century.

The discipleship process is evident throughout this book. The clear intention of this book calls upon Christians to focus on: the Incarnation (rather than self-serving), the cross (rather than self-preservation), and weakness and dependency upon God (rather than stability and strength). Triumphalism, the "ME" generation, the do it "my way" societies, with a view to no suffering, short term, and success are all in contra-distinction to the plan of God, and the evidence of lives found in the Bible. It is time, once again, for the Church in the West to teach thoughtfully on this subject. It is important that we learn to identify with God's plan for history, and his flock around the world who face sufferings and persecutions with regularity.

This is not a volume to be quickly read. For the reflective practitioner of missiology, and indeed, for pastors and teachers, this work should be read thoughtfully. The bibliography is an exhaustive eighteen pages, and some of the real hidden treats are found in the 592 Endnotes.

Glenn Penner's fifteen years of study on this subject demonstrates a mastery of material and a contribution of knowledge to the Kingdom. This reviewer will not be surprised if there is future curriculum built around this excellent book. This book should be read by every individual, and discussed in fellowships and communities. <<