



Suffering Church Sunday

1 Thess 1:2 We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. 3 We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. 6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. 7 And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia--your faith in God has become known everywhere.

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This seems quite a pertinent footnote to my sermon on perseverance last week. In fact, I read some of these verses from the first letter to the Thessalonians. Here were a church who were well known throughout what was historic Greece - Macedonia and Achaia. Why? Because they were not afraid to tell people about Jesus never mind the consequences.

And so has been the history of the church from that day to this. Whether we like it or not, the history of the church has been characterised by suffering and martyrdom which is hard to connect with in our comfortable lifestyle. Images on TV, words and pictures on paper and even on the Internet seem somehow unreal. Yet the truth is some 200 million Christians are in countries where Christians are discriminated against in some way or other. Discrimination is the simplest form of persecution and occurs in many countries. This occurs even in countries where nominally there is religious freedom like Greece and particularly in moderate Muslim countries like Tunisia or Turkey. If the government don't persecute, extremists may do.

In other countries the penalty for being a Christian and worshipping with others can be severe.

North Korea is probably the worst persecuting country in the world to day. Tens of thousands of Christians are believed to be in forced labour camps where beatings, starvation and death are common. Saudi Arabia has no freedom of religion. It is illegal to meet with others to worship and the consequence is a jail sentence. The country of Laos is scarcely better. They do allow churches but people are put under threats of death and beatings to renounce their faith. Many are actually beaten up and murdered. In all three countries, the government sponsors this persecution.

In other countries, the Government either doesn't care or turns a blind eye even if Christianity is tolerated. Christians may be persecuted in these countries either by officialdom or extremist groups. What countries do you know of in which Christians are persecuted?

The list of persecuting countries is enormous:

Armenia	Peru
Bangladesh	Egypt
Bhutan	Iraq
Burma	Jordan
Chechnya	Lebanon
China	Morocco
East Timor	Saudi Arab
India	
Indonesia	Armenia
Kazakhstan	Chechnya
Laos	Kazakhstan
Malaysia	Russia
Maldives	Turkmenistan
Nepal	
North Korea	Eritrea
Pakistan	Kenya
Russia	Nigeria
Sri Lanka	Sudan
Turkmenistan	Zimbabwe
Vietnam	
Colombia	Bulgaria
Cuba	France
Guatemala	Greece
Mexico	Turkey

This begs an important question” why be a Christian in one of these countries when all you get is discriminated against, locked in prison, executed, beaten up, murdered?

Paul’s’ words to the Thessalonians helps us here.

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Because the gospel was not all words, but with power, the Holy Spirit and conviction. Here were Paul and his team and they weren’t convinced in their heads, but they had a conviction in their hearts. And Paul was the model they imitated. He risked his life to bring the gospel to them because he really believed it would change their lives and make a difference. What makes a person that is prepared to risk death to believe something? Someone who knows that something is true. the conviction is right there, deep in their heart. And Paul had that conviction and the Thessalonians imitated him.

Why is it that 200 million people suffer discrimination, social isolation, risk violence and death for the name of Christ, yet the 2 million people that profess Christ in the UK are mostly too afraid or ashamed of the gospel that they will not even share it with their neighbours or worse - with their loved ones? We have the words, but where’s the conviction? It should do more than make us thing - it should make us come before God in repentance.

Do you know what persecuted Christians ask for us to pray for. Not that the persecution will depart, but that they will stand faithfully for Jesus? The church is

growing rapidly in countries like China despite persecution. The church is even growing in the Middle East despite persecution. But Britain?

We need to come before God and ask Him to give us that deep conviction and drive that we need to witness to others and stand testimony - and that in a country where no-one opposes us.

But you'll notice I missed a bit out:

because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

With power, with the Holy Spirit and with conviction. The thing that changed the world for Paul wasn't his conviction but that the gospel came with power and the Holy Spirit.

One of the things I believe that hinders revival in this country is that we try to bring the gospel with word and sometimes with conviction, but we shrink back when we talk about manifestations of the power of God and we don't ask for it. We have a fear of asking for an anointing of the Holy Spirit because we fear what the consequences will be, particularly in our own lives. So rather than having life changing power and conviction of the Holy Spirit we have church and our nice comfortable lives.

This isn't so for the suffering church. This is why they are prepared to die for their faith. They are people who have heard the gospel, they have seen God's power in their lives, they walk with the Spirit and keep in step with Him: because they've got to!. And in that walk they see how He proves His faithfulness to them and they have deep conviction. In a nutshell, they take God seriously and walk with Him.

Today I want us to intercede for the suffering church. Not so that we are sorry for them because they don't want our pity - they want our fellowship in prayer. What we do need is to be challenged their example and call on God to raise in use that Holy Spirit boldness that will make a difference in our lives by the power of His Spirit and the lives of those we pray for and those we minister to - irrespective of what people think and do.

Prayer - repentance - call upon power - pray that we will stand. Thank God for the example of suffering church - pray that they will stand. Pray for freedom.

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