

## Sufferings and Glories [1 Pet 1:3-11]

Isn't it true that we often take things for granted? We take our way of life for granted, or our partners for granted. We only realise how important they are when they are taken away from us. Then what do we do?

We have been blessed in this land in the past. Christians have not really been persecuted since 1689 and in the past our forefathers made this freedom something that they used to the glory of God. Britain became the greatest mission sending country in the world. We sent missionaries to every part of the world and in some form that continues to today.

I wish that were true of our country now, but it isn't. We send the missionaries abroad, yes, but usually they don't actually preach the gospel - they stay safe in their missionary compounds and are evacuated if there are problems. I was reading a book recently by an Indian Christian called K P Yohannan where he states, quite correctly to my mind, that the view of mission in the West focuses only on our mission activities and we are sometimes led to believe we are the only ones doing it. The truth is that in most developing countries, most mission is done by indigenous churches and evangelists.

Take Nepal for example. We send doctors and nurses and teachers. I'm sure they do good stuff but they are not allowed to preach the gospel and encourage conversion. That's illegal. . Their presence is a witness they say. This is mission, Western style. What about the countless towns and villages where westerners never get? They've been visited by Indian and indigenous Nepalese evangelists. It's illegal to preach the gospel and they know that but they do it anyway. The result? People come to Christ and as is typical in the developing world; they come in their droves. And the evangelists? They are often arrested, beaten and murdered. This is mission, Acts style.

Over the last year or so I have been impressed by the way in which the gospel grows rapidly in the non-western world. Unlike Britain of the last 200 years, the countries where the gospel is growing most rapidly are places hostile to the gospel, even if people are freely allowed to preach the gospel. I'm not surprised. The church grew very rapidly in the first three centuries even though it was illegal. The rot set in when it was legalised!

Take this quote about mission in India today. This was a prayer request sent me *last week*

A Gospel for Asia church of 51 believers in Jharkhand, India, is under attack as anti-Christian leaders meet to decide its fate! Many in the village have expressed their desire to beat GFA missionary Babuser and the new believers, steal their land and other belongings, and ultimately drive them out of the village.

As the village meeting continues, they are pressuring leaders to inflict maximum harm on these believers. Village leaders have already made at

least one decision: The Christians must pay a fee to even meet together for church. GFA missionaries from other villages have travelled there to encourage their brothers and sisters in Christ.

This persecution follows a mighty move of God. By God's grace, three influential families in the village very recently received Christ! Even as the lives of the Christians in this village are in danger, they ask us to pray they will stand strong in the faith and see the ministry grow. They also request prayer that those opposing the Gospel will be touched by the love of Christ.

There are plenty of stories like that in different countries of the world. What would we do if people in Swaffham started to complain about us when we start to become more active in the gospel?

Yet the gospel is exploding in India at the moment. Why don't we hear about it? Because western missionaries are banned and we think that the only place where God works is where Western mission works.

We thought the church in China had been wiped out by Communism. How wrong we were. It continue to exist in house churches from 1949 and through the Cultural revolution of the 1960s. It has grown consistently and since the 1980s when the country was liberalised, has grown even more rapidly even though the activities of Christians are still restricted and the gospel is preached illegally. At Living Water we heard testimony from Brother Yun a leading Chinese Christian. He wasn't there to thrill us with his testimony, but to give us the vision of the church in China today. And what is that vision? They have a vision called Back to Jerusalem - to evangelise all the countries between China and Jerusalem. These countries are all the most un-evangelised countries in the world and where preaching the gospel is illegal and Christians are persecuted - Burma, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia. Missionaries are already going as migrant workers - and preaching the gospel - they are beaten, jailed, killed. And we don't hear much about that either.

And we are comfortable. Even though there is freedom of speech and freedom of religion, not persecution - the Church in Britain does not move out of its complacency.

Why is that the case? Let's look at the passage from Peter  
*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*

For men like Brother Yun, or these missionaries in India, they preach the gospel and risk their lives doing so because they understand what a living hope they actually have. God changes lives. Conversion is not having a different set of ideas in your mind, but it's a transforming way of life. It

makes us into sons and daughters of the living God. We are different, special.

And that's the difference between this country and the majority of the countries in the world where the gospel is growing despite persecution. Salvation *changes* people. It takes them out of lives of darkness into light. And people in this country walk in the same darkness. The transformation is so profound in countries like China and India or for that matter Brazil or Argentina, or Nigeria or South Africa - that those people are prepared to risk life and limb to let other people know. They are the children of God.

*6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

What does suffering prove. The faithfulness of God. Our faith is refined when we start to take risks for God.

Risks can lead to problems. Brother Yun has been arrested many times and imprisoned 5 times. The last time they broke his legs and locked him up. But like Peter in Acts, God told him to get up. He was healed. He found all the prison doors unlocked and walked out of the prison and into the street unchallenged. As he got into the deserted street a taxi rounded the corner and offered him a lift home. Suffering tests our faith. In obeying and taking risks we prove the faithfulness of God.

And here we are. It is safe to go to church. It is perfectly safe to tell our friends and neighbours we are Christians. But do we? The evidence of declining churches in this country gives us a clear answer.

In Swaffham, we have a green light to do whatever mission we want and harvest fields that are plentiful and workers few. That's not the situation in China and North Korea and many other countries. They die doing things we won't leave our armchairs for!

But as we explore scripture and the passage in Luke we had this morning we see that we've had our chance - we're not going to get another one.

*10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11 trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.*

God wants us to take the risks and do the mission. Why are we going to make the effort and take the risks?

Verse 11 - this is not the best example of the idea but it will do. We see that redemption was achieved through the sufferings of Christ. We see that the purposes of God have been achieved at a price. Hebrews 4 is better as we see how Christ is sympathetic with our sufferings because He has been there and in persevering has achieved our salvation and is now glorified. The sufferings we may go through for Him are nothing compared to the glories that will follow.

In China they recognise that price and are prepared to pay it for the sake of sharing that gospel. When I heard Brother Yun sharing his testimony at Living Water, I couldn't get over the contrast. He was prepared to do whatever it took to bring the gospel to men. His evangelists are doing that now.

We're going forward in mission. That is our destiny. There's no risk involved, only a willingness to go the extra mile, only the willingness to invest time and money. It's an easy harvest. Let's grasp it and go forward.



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