

**THE
CHRISTIAN
AND
PERSECUTION**

Theological Reflections on Persecution

MODULE 2



Lesson Two

Theological Reflections on Persecution

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this lesson the students will be able to think theologically on suffering, to acquire a holistic understanding of the Gospel, and to see how Christians and Church are called to share in the sufferings of others

Preparatory Bible Reading: 2 Corinthians 4:7-18

Lesson Outline:

Introduction

1. Does God work for the “good” of those who love Him?
 - a. What is our 'greatest good'?
 - b. Being Christ in a dark world
 - c. Implications for personal spirituality
 - d. Implications for understanding of a church
2. Persecution as the Voice of God
 - a. A holistic understanding of the Gospel
 - b. Incarnation as bringing the Gospel
 - c. Price for being the voice of God
3. Hope in the Risen Lord Jesus
 - a. Promise of being welcomed, restored and glorified
 - b. Restoration of our honour
4. Persecution and the Body of Christ
 - a. Sharing the sufferings of others as sharing suffering of Christ
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The reality of suffering presents deep questions that require detailed theological reflection about its place within the purposes of God.

Introduction

If there is one thing that is clear for the church in the Middle East and North Africa, it is the fact that there is no clear sight of the end of troubles in the region in the near future.

As our countries go through historic political changes, Christians often find themselves vulnerable to be caught between groups fighting to seize power. Sadly, in most places, this means that Christians have faced tremendous social pressures to take sides, or live isolated lives, and what's worse face life threatening situations.

Beyond the scope of regional political changes, Christians have continually found themselves in tensions with their countries' governments and security forces. Those who choose to follow Christian faith from other religious backgrounds have faced immense pressure and persecution even from their own families.

As I write these sentences, dozens of Christian leaders are in jail in Iran, some are facing death penalty; thousands of Syrian Christians are on the move seeking shelter in neighboring countries; Iraqi Christians who had fled from tremendous difficulties in Iraq to Syria now face either returning to Iraq or uproot once more to another country. Thousands of Christian asylum seekers and refugees are trapped into poverty in camps and foreign cities while they await a solution to their situation. Meanwhile, the numbers of Christians are going down dramatically across the region. Christians in Egypt face increasing attacks and limitation in social and economic opportunities.

Within this reality, some Christians give up their faith. Some leave their countries behind with tears and difficulties. Some Christians are tortured. Some are murdered. Some are forced to do things that are contrary to their conscience and beliefs.

This reality directly challenges the most common modern day understanding of what Paul meant in Romans 8:28 by our 'good'. If our 'good' is a stable, safe, healthy, happy and reasonably wealthy middle class life, then logically one can conclude that God really does not work for the 'good' of the biggest portion of the global church today. Somehow, the persecuted church must have failed in demonstrating their 'love' for God.

On the other hand, it may be that the sacrifices of the persecuted church have indeed physically proven their love and commitment to God, thus the problem does not lie with the persecuted church but with God. It may be that God favors the Western church and grants a 'good' life only to European and American Christians, thus God may not be a just and fair God. Or it may be that God does not keep his promises, and that he is an inconsistent God whom we cannot really trust.

If the later is true, that the problem lies not in the failure of the persecuted church but in God, then one really understands why most of the converts from other religions give up their Christian faith within two years. Why bother to put trust in a God who is not fair and trustable when those who believe in Him continue to face persecution?

1. Does God work for the “good” of those who love Him?

God works for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28), but this ‘good’ is often misunderstood. Our calling is to be conformed to the likeness of his son, the suffering servant.

In fact, we should not be the only ones asking these difficult questions. The apostle which God inspired to write Roman 8:28 also seems to be living a life that is far from any seemingly “good” life. In 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul says that he has “despaired even of life” and provides a clear picture of the difficulties he faces in chapter 11 of the same letter:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. (11:24-27)

The story has it that one day Theresa of Avila fell off the carriage she was riding on. Angry at the dirty and disappointing situation she found herself in, she turned and asked God what He was doing by allowing her to be covered in mud. In return God answered her saying; “this is the way I treat my friends.” When one looks at the life of Paul who was eventually martyred, one is pushed to echo the reply Theresa gave to God: “no wonder, you don't have that many!” So why would Paul continue to believe in a God who treats his friends this way? After all Paul was a convert who paid a big prize to follow Him and could have easily reversed the situation, joining back to the Pharisee camp.

There may be few answers to that. Paul may be influenced by stoic ideas which encouraged him to seek pain in order to develop his strength to be a virtuous man. It may be that neo-platonic ideas which see the material body as a hindrance that must be overcome in order to achieve the freedom of soul, encouraged him to pursue a life of suffering and sacrifice. Or, one can employ modern psychoanalytical tools which may show us that it may be that Paul is a masochist who actively seeks out pain and enjoys being in such conditions. All of these possible answers point the ultimate goal of such life to be self gratification. This is directly parallel to our modern day conceptions of a 'good' life for which the ultimate end is self satisfaction and glorification, though we have long ago dropped out the need for self-discipline in order to achieve higher virtues in life. It is exactly at this disjuncture that the incapacity of the modern church to reconcile the suffering of the global church with a God of love emerges.

What is our 'greatest good'?

When we look at ancient definitions of *summum bonum*, greatest good, we begin to realize how we may have misunderstood what the Biblical writers meant with 'good' life or what Christ meant by 'abundant' life. For Aristotle, the greatest good of human beings is to be 'happy.' This should not be mistaken with what we mean by happiness today; a subjective feeling of content. In Aristotelian terms, happiness is living a good life; a life that is lived in the pursuit of higher values and virtues. That is why he was not sure whether or not we should wait till the end of someone's life in order to call them 'happy', since the quality of life can only be understood in its overall togetherness. A good life is not devoid of suffering, sacrifice and self-discipline. These must be faced in the pursuit of a virtuous life.

In fact Paul does spell out the ultimate goal only within which we can begin to understand what our good is. The famous quote from Romans 8:28 often stops at the first clause; “and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him” without the following quality of those who love him: “who are called according to *his* purpose.” This often omitted bit holds the key. Those who love him are those that are called not for their own gratification but for *his* purposes. What is His purpose? In 8:29 Paul continues to contradict our modern expectations. His purpose is to confirm those who love him “to the likeness of his Son.” This purpose applies not only to the apostles but to all of his children. Our highest good is not a problem free, satisfying life full of pleasure and self glorification. It is to be like His Son.

Being Christ in a dark world

Paul continues to face a difficult life, not because the suffering itself is the end goal as virtue or as a merit, on the contrary suffering is not about him or his salvation at all. Paul is not suffering because God is cruel and does not know how to treat his friends. He suffers and lives that life for a higher purpose:

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (2 Cor. 4:10-12)

This higher purpose is identical with the purpose of the Son of God: to bring the life of God to us by his own sacrifice and by doing so glorify God's name. This dual purpose, *life* and *glory*, echoes in the life and sacrifice of the apostle. Through his identification with the Son of God in his suffering what emerges is also the continuation of the work of the Son of God. Paul's unusual choice of the Greek word *thanatos* for 'death' in 4:10 signifies not a one time event such as death on the cross, but a continual process of “fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.” A day to day embracing of the exclusion and physical suffering the Son of God went through. Every follower of Christ is called into this fellowship and granted “on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.” (Phil. 1:29) But this fellowship is for a purpose outside of the suffering and death and not for a self imposed purification or a way of achieving salvation. This fellowship is for bringing *life* to the world and *glory* to God.

The work of Christ has not finished but only started by the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the son of Joseph. The era which we dwell in witnesses the already-here and not-yet dimensions of the Kingdom of God at the same time. The Kingdom is in fact here amongst us. God's salvation plan is unfolding but remains as unfinished till its consummation in His second coming and renewing of the creation. When we place ourselves within this salvation history, then our modern day conceptions of Christian spirituality and church are directly challenged.

Implications for Personal Spirituality

Thanks to the subjectification that modernity brought to Christianity, most of the time, there is a tendency to understand Christian spirituality as an individual experience with its ultimate goal being the emotional, material and social satisfaction of the believers along with personal growth in holiness, knowledge and experience of God. In short, Christian spirituality as we witness today is a self centered journey to a self-end, which carries striking parallelism with contemporary New Age spiritualities.

For us, there is only one model of what it means to live a “spiritual” life, which is the life of Jesus. He has not only showed us who God is but also what it means to be a perfect human being. In him, we see the fullness of the very ideal that we are being called to be “conformed.” That is what sanctification has always meant and that is the end of our final transformation. Thus, if one seeks to understand what it means to believe in God, live in the power of Holy Spirit in a very earthly setting, we have to look at the spirituality of Jesus.

From his humbling incarnation that gives up the free use of his will aside from implementing the Father's will, to his submission to the purpose of the Father which is to bring salvation, his social exclusion and ultimate murder and resurrection, what we see is the prototype that we are all asked to model. This is a call to life outside of self interest and gratification and to a life which willingly submits to the calling of God.

Implications for Understanding of a Church

The implication of a Jesus-like spirituality to our conceptions of church is equally dramatic and equally challenging to common perceptions. In the century of self centered spiritualities, the church's role is to provide for the needs of individuals who are a part of that church. Church as an institution exists for catering Christians in their individual quests. Yet, when the Church is understood as the Body of Christ, in the good old Biblical sense, then a contradiction surfaces. If the church is the Body of the One whose calling is to bring *life* and *glory*, then the church is the representative, continuation of the same calling. The church is called to be his visible presence in his absence not as a self serving community, but continue the work Christ began.

What is physically expressed in the sacrament of baptism is exactly the infusion of these two themes. In Baptism, the individual identifies him or herself with the death of Christ and his resurrection, which in return integrates him or her into the body of Christ. Though some of us may have distinct individual callings, we are all called as the Church, not as an organization, but as the living body of Christ. Our individual callings are only part of this

overall calling. The church exists as the embodiment of the Gospel message, in and through which Holy Spirit works, not to entertain or gratify her members, but to enable them to carry on the work of Christ to bring *life* and *glory* in a dark and painful world.

This calling is the very core of Christian life and the church, no matter where we are and no matter what circumstances we are facing. Whether in a country where there is immense physical persecution and where Christians are a small minority, or in a country where Christians only face sarcasms and form a strong presence in the society, we are all called to be faithful to our calling. It is not the outcome of our faithfulness to our calling as Christians that makes us “faith heroes”. One may never face a physical threat for being a Christian, but all of us are called to be faithful. We are not judged by God from a Hollywood point of view, that is to say how great, heavenly testimonies we have about difficult external situations. We are judged only by our internal quality of being faithful to God, which is same for every Christian no matter under what circumstances they live. Persecuted and non-Persecuted Christians are all called to bring *life* and *glory* to God. We are all equal members of the body with equal responsibilities and expectations.

Discussion Questions

- a. The author is saying that sufferings, sacrifice and self-discipline are necessity for the pursuit of a virtuous life. Are they really necessary? As a Christian believer, maybe persecuted, how can you see this as requirement for the growth of your personal spiritual life and that of your local church?
- b. The author says, “Our highest good is not a problem free, satisfying life full of pleasure and self-glorification”. What does he mean by “highest good”? Argue giving your personal perspective.
- c. How do you see/understand persecution in terms of the already-here and not-yet dimensions? Explain.

2. Persecution as the Voice of God

Through identifying with the Son of God in his suffering, the Church participates in the work of the Son of God – to bring life to the world and glory to God.

If, then, Christian life is understood as a continuation of the calling of Christ, persecution that we see in Christ's life and his promises that we will too be rejected because of our belief in him are integral to our lives, no matter where we are. There will never be a moment or a place on earth, in which the believers will not face reaction against their beliefs. But this is not a passive resignation and inability to change the situation as Nietzsche perceived it to be. It is an active embracement and ability to choose meekness, difficulty, submission with a higher purpose in mind. Thus what we see in Jesus is not an inability to react, get angry, seek revenge, as portrayed by Nietzsche; on the contrary it is the strength that comes from submission to a higher calling.

Incarnation of the Son of God emerges from the heart of the Father who cannot remain indifferent and distant to the suffering of his children. He chooses to enter into a life that limits himself in time and space. The creator of the universe chooses to sleep rough on the hills and dwell among people who persecute him. The Wisdom which creates is ridiculed by his creatures as to be mad and wrong. The One who reigns on an eternal throne stands accused in front of a handful of religious leaders sure of their power and authority. In presenting his body to the possibility of being hurt and ridiculed, rather than running away or using his might, he presents life to those who persecute him.

A Holistic Understanding of the Gospel

The gospel message can be described with a set of propositions, sentences or doctrinal formulations in order to make the transmission of the message possible. But ultimately, the Gospel is what is embodied in the life of the Son of God. He who has chosen not to remain indifferent humbled himself to be among us, showing us his truth in the human dimension which we can grasp and the truth of being fully human, both of which we have long lost sight of. The Good News is brought to us in the totality of the life he lived, the death he suffered and won victory over.

The neat categories of modern theologies separate the person, the work and the teachings of Christ by virtue of the modern urge for compartmentalized thinking. Within such a framework there is the danger of reducing the gospel message to propositional statements about the work of Christ and sharing the gospel is only understood in written or spoken verbal communication of that reduced message. Thus the descriptive application of the metaphorical language of 'reaching' a nation is seen as writing and distributing tracks, books or the Scriptures.

This partially true understanding of the Gospel results in a partial understanding of what it means to fulfil the Great Commission. Brining the life of Christ to our communities is not simply making sure that the doctrinal tenets of Christian faith are properly understood by the people around us. The Gospel message is in the life that we live which shows itself in our individual actions, commitment and the dynamics of the church as an alternative community with an alternative set of values that embraces the weak, sick and needy, and reaches the world as the very embrace God offers to a world in pain. That is why in *Karamazov Brothers*, Dostoevsky rightfully argues that the answer to the question of theodicy is the communion of believers and an active love practiced by God's children.

What really makes the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth powerful is exactly this life-size quality, not the beautifully crafted rhetoric. His life, sacrifice and humble presence and vulnerability amidst people is the corresponding truth beyond communicative sentences. He *is* the way, the truth and the life.

Incarnation as Bringing the Gospel

Understood this way, the Great Commission, 'to go' to the foreign nations as outsiders or 'to be' salt and light in our own local settings, is fulfilled by the same embracing of the life and truth of Jesus Christ as 'living sacrifices.' So it is no surprise that Paul can say 'death is at work in us so that life can be at work' in them. The life which Christ brings can only be transmitted to the world by the lives of his children who are called for his purposes, to be like Him.

The only way a deaf and blind world can hear and see the Gospel message is by seeing it in our lives. The only way the life of Christ can reach to the nations is by following his incarnation; submission to God's will and presenting ourselves in all of our vulnerability. Since the world rejected the one whom we believe and the one who called us to be like him, it will reject us too. The aroma of Christ as embodied in our lives means both life and judgment to the world in the same time. Christ will continue to produce both love in the hearts of people and engender hatred since his truth is contradictory to the 'self' which drives our lives. And those who are called *Christians* will always remain as recipients of the transference, to use a Freudian word, of this reaction.

We accept and receive this suffering not in passive resentment but because of the calling of the church and the core of Christian spirituality, to bring *life* to the world and *glory* to God. It is through our presence in the persecuted settings that the people who needs *life* can receive the life that Christ brought. It is through our stubborn commitment to love those who persecute us and to dwell in nations that torment us, the words we use to speak of the Gospel message gains an impacting power. That is why the prophets of the Bible lived symbolic lives with actual symbolic actions, such as sitting in dust and ashes. The lives of the prophets were the very voice of God speaking to people; just as the life and sacrifices of Paul was the channel through which God spoke to the nations.

Price for being the Voice of God

In Europe, there is a wise old saying: "it is often dark at the foot of the lighthouse." The lighthouse imagery is helpful to conceptualize the zoe paradox – the death which brings life, in the work and life of Paul. When one assumes the role of the mouthpiece for God to speak his words, there is often silence in the life which becomes the voice of God. The Christ cries out in anguish on the cross when God the Father turns his face away from his pain and tears. Yet, the silence of God is not same as the absence of God. Within that silent moment, He is present in our pain, suffering and isolation. He is hurting with us as we are hurting like his Son, and fulfilling his work in our bodies. At that moment of His silence towards us, He is speaking loudly to the world around us, through our fragility. It is not surprising, then, the main character of the novel the Silence by Endo ends the novel by saying; "our Lord was not silent. Even if he had been silent, my life until this day would have spoken of him." (Endo, 1988: 298)

It is this act of being the very voice of God that brings the greatest *glory* to God, not ascetic experiences during a musical worship celebration. God is pleased the most when his children submits their will and presents themselves on His behalf in all of their vulnerability.

The greatest glory Jesus brought to God was not when he walked on the waters, prayed for long hours, but when he cried in agony in the garden of Gethsemane and when he continued to follow God's will even though it meant isolation, darkness and the silence of God. Thus we do know that when everything around us fails, when we are destroyed and abandoned, our tears, blood and dead corpses are the greatest worship songs we have ever sang.

Discussion Questions

- a. Describe the role of your local church in dealing with persecution. Critique its way and be specific. Does it embody Christ? In what way?
- b. The author says, "The silence of God is not same as the absence of God". What do you think? Have you ever experienced this God who is at work in His silence? Explain.
- c. What does baptism express? And what does it mean for you today as Christian living in the so-called Arab spring? Should the church be involved?

3. Hope in the Risen Lord Jesus

As much as we participate in the sufferings of Christ, we also share in the resurrection, glory and honour of the Son of God

Yet, the dead body is not the end of the story. The one who has sacrificed his life is also the One who has been glorified; "because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence." (2 Cor. 4:14) It is no coincidence that first Paul refers to the 'raised' Jesus as Lord, and then drops the title "Lord" and refers to the "human" name of Jesus, the Son of Joseph, who has embraced his death and suffering.

When we identify ourselves with the humiliation, suffering and death of Jesus, we are also granted the privilege of being identified with the resurrection, glory and reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Therefore, we do not lose heart" even though we are weakened by the suffering. (2 Cor. 4:14) The promise of sharing His resurrection and glory gives us a strong hope; that our sacrifices are not in vain and do not go unnoticed, even though no other human being or the global church know or care about what we are going through and even though there may not be any visible reason or rhyme that we see for our suffering now.

This means that our calling to bring *life* to the world and *glory* to God has other blessed fruits besides the joy we have now: the joy of bringing hope and light to a painful world through our stubborn presence amidst darkness and the joy of pleasing the God whom we love, through our willing surrender to His desire. Here I am speaking of a far greater joy that awaits us; the joy of being welcomed, restored and glorified by the Father, just as He *welcomed, restored and glorified* His risen Son.

Promise of being welcomed, restored and glorified

How much more the Father would rejoice to see his children return home from a long separation that they went through to accomplish what the Father sent them to do, than a return from a journey they set up themselves to and destroyed their lives for their own selfish pursuits. It is love and mercy that welcomes the Prodigal Son. For those who return not only as the children but also as the emissaries, who are loved, longed for and missed, it is also pride, approval and joy that *welcome* them. It is the approval of the Master who praises his servants by saying “Well done, good and faithful servant!” It is the joy of a Groom that sees and passionately embraces his bride who has waited patiently and purely, and kept herself for her lover during the prolonged engagement. It is the pride of a Father who sees his children’s commitment and success, and rejoices to see them back in His house again.

The journey does leave its mark on the body and the soul! It is the power of the *welcoming* that grants us *restoration*. The tired soul, weary heart and the bleeding body reach the only place where there are not only no more tears and pain, but where they are transformed into beauty. When two lovers meet after a long separation, the pain they went through loses its grotesque reality and is absorbed into the beauty and power of love, in the face of which every sacrifice seems to be a small, temporary difficulty. And at the moment of that loving kiss, all that has been arrives at its destiny; the love that nothing can separate us from, never!

The one who is *welcomed* and *restored* is also *glorified*. The dignity, which has been denied, is restored far beyond what it has ever been. What little we had and sacrificed is met with the greatness we are granted and rewarded with: “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (2 Cor. 4:17) When speaking of the resurrection of dead bodies, Paul juxtaposes the difference between our bodies now and then: “the body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown as a natural body, it is raised as a spiritual body.” (1 Cor. 15:42b-43). However, we are not only *glorified* through our resurrected bodies that are made perfect, but by also through being honoured by God.

Since we rightfully dwell upon the grace that makes our salvation a possibility, and that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory, we tend to overlook this idea of being honoured and rewarded by God. Yet, the grace that saves is also the grace that sees and cherishes the attempt that the sinner shows to glorify the One who has bestowed grace. Love cannot not praise the object of its love. Just as we praise the One that loves us, the One we love also rejoices and “praises” the objects of His love.

If the Father puts a fine cloak on the shoulder of the Prodigal Son and a ring on his fingers, and ask others to rejoice for him for the son’s return, how much more He would do to honour His children and proudly speak of them.

Restoration of Our Honour

For us, the Middle Eastern Christians that live in shame and honour based societies and who are continually “shamed” and “disgraced”, there is a further implication of *glorification* that is often overlooked or not so significant for Western theologians and Christians. This over-looked promise is the promise of being granted “a new name”. (Rev. 2:17) In our cultures, names have significance, a meaning beyond their semantics. Our names are either agents of honour, dignity, or shame, disgrace used within and by our communities. Since we in the non-western world drive our identities from who we are in relation to our communities, rather than self-autonomy and actualization, granting of names and their recollections play a crucial role in our place in our communities and self-perception.

That is why a believer who converts to Christian faith from another religion hurts a life-time when his name is not spoken by his family, or ridiculed and remembered in disgrace. Our own names become thorns in the flesh, constant reminders of our cross. The promise of a new name given by God signifies restored dignity, far more significant than the loss of our names granted and used by our communities. He will give us a new name and we will no more walk around and remembered in shame, but we will walk straight and our names will be remembered in honour.

It is only with this promise in the Resurrection with Lord Jesus that living in under persecution becomes bearable. The promises based upon the unchanging character of God provide a basis to hold firm and continue to follow His calling. Sometimes, in the thickest point of darkness, a small light shines. God speaks or reveals his love. The darkness still remains as darkness, but even a tiny revelation of His love and presence renews our strength. Often, it is only when everything else that we turn to, or take delight in, or look for, melt away even a tiny glimpse of His sight equals to all that is known and heard.

Other times, senses are devoid and only draws our attention to our pain. At that moment, we have to hold fast, have faith in our calling to bring *life* and *glory*, and in the final union that awaits us with the One who has called us. Faith is the most precious and important commodity, without which it is impossible to please God and to follow Him. And Faith is only proven real in the pit of darkness. As the more experienced demon Screwtape in the classic book by C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, warns the younger demon, Wormwood, who is assigned to lead astray a human being:

Be not deceived, Wormwood, our cause is never more in jeopardy than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe in which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.

Discussion Questions

- a. What does it mean for you today to be welcomed, restored and glorified by time you are facing persecution?

- b. Talk about your personal journey with God (in the light of the lesson).
- c. At some point in our lives we feel that God has forsaken us but we still obey. Why?

4. Persecution and the Body of Christ

Jesus confronts and can gently restore to himself those who have denied him. Restoration back into the community of believers is often a far greater challenge!

So, after all we do know where God is in the midst of persecution. He is there, right with us, in us. He is present through our lives, words, pain and deaths. He has not forgotten us or turned away His face from us. He holds back his power, so that we can accomplish his work, so that our sacrifices can be sources of life and healing to the world. He is not distant to our pain; He is in prison with us, He is naked, He is beaten, He is raped and killed! (Mat 25) We know that He is not quite but is speaking powerfully through the lives, suffering and death of his children.

As Christ prayed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, during that dark night, he knew that he had to carry on his calling even though it will cost his life to him. He knew that it was the only way to bring life. He knew that his brutal death would glorify God. The world history changed during that night, not on the cross. It changed when the Son of God chose to not give up, but hold firm to the calling and promises of God, even though it meant to bear the Silence of God.

But there was another question besides the question, “Why have you forsaken me?”, Christ asked the Lord on the cross. It was; “Why are you sleeping?” (Luke 22:46) Renate Wind, in his book titled, *The Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, points out that Bonhoeffer found this passage in the Bible to be most troubling one. Here was the perfect Son of God asking for the support of simple human beings, not that they can say or do something to ease his pain. He just wanted them to stay awake with him.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, we see Christ inviting his followers to share his pain and be part of the difficult calling he has to go through for the salvation of the world. With this invitation Christ incorporates his followers into his communion with the Holy Spirit who is there to give him strength. By asking them to stay awake with him and pray, Christ is asking them to support him as he is about to suffer. Christ accepts his calling and asks us to share it with him.

In Matthew 25, Christ takes the call to share his pain beyond sharing his personal pain into sharing the pain of all who suffered. In the parable of the sheep and the goat, Christ not only shows that he is with the people who suffer and their sufferings are his, he leaves a serious challenge to God’s people; if you do not run to help those who suffer, you are not only failing the order to love your neighbor but also letting Christ to suffer alone.

Sharing the Sufferings of Others as Sharing Suffering of Christ

With this, our calling to be like Him not only involves picking up our own cross and go through our own suffering, but embrace the suffering of Christ in those who suffer. The body of Christ is called to stay awake with Christ by staying awake with those who are in prison, who are tortured and who cry alone in dark isolated rooms in fear of their next day. In Matthew 25, Christ warns us that if we do not run to the aid of those who suffer, he will exclude us from the privilege of being a member of his family; for to belong to that family is to offer his embrace to this world, not merely fulfill religious duties.

This means that in our personal spirituality as well as the calling of the church his suffering and the suffering of human beings play a central role. That is why we celebrate the Holy Communion. Through breaking of bread and drinking of wine, we do not only remember his suffering for us, but we partake in it. By partaking in his suffering, we are partaking in its gore and glory, pain and restoration. We do not break that bread and drink the cup merely as a personal act of remembrance, but as the community of those who belong to Christ. We enter into a relationship with all those who have and will have partaken in it. By eating and drink his body and blood, we do not only receive his healing but his challenge to be a healing in his name to all those who suffer.

Therefore, while suffering for Christ is an inevitable aspect of an individual Christians journey in certain places and moments in history, it is also an intrinsic duty of the body of Christ to be with those who suffer, even if it means to simply stay awake.

In fact, when we talk to individuals who have gone through dark deserts and immense suffering, they often testify that what kept them through and helped them to cope was the knowledge that fellow believers were there and helped them and prayed for them. Without the body of Christ, it often becomes impossible to follow Christ.

Love, mercy and trust in the Lord

The realization that not only us, but even Christ doubted what God the Father has asked him to do and cried in agony and asked human beings to share his pain, makes us accept the human fragility and need for support, love and forgiveness.

Thus, a theology of persecution automatically brings with itself a strong reminder of trust in Lord's love and providence and, based up on these, the demonstration of his love to fellow human beings who suffer.

Under persecution, no matter how genuine one's faith is, many believers do give up. Sometimes pain is just too much to bear, sometimes the mind loses its perceptions and grasp on reality and the presence of God. Sometimes, we all find ourselves in moments where fear engulfs us and we do not see any heroes in ourselves.

Ultimately, we know that no matter how mature we think we are in Christ, and how far we have traveled with him in this journey, we are saved by grace and we need that grace to maintain us till the very end of the race. We know, that just like Christ, we need brothers

and sisters to hold our hands, support us, be kind to us, when necessary remind the love of God and sometimes simply hold and cry with us.

Thus, just as Christ has been gracious with his followers who have left him when things got difficult, we need to learn and accept the grace not only we need but those who might fall away from the faith need to. In the story of Apostle Peter, we see a bold follower of Christ that eventually denies him under duress to only be restored by the love and forgiveness in Christ to be the corner stone of his church.

The church is full of Peters today, whose journey and whose faith is known only by the God who called them, redeemed and commissioned them. What is left to us is to ensure that in our personal lives and churches, we welcome and care for everyone and learn to offer love and forgiveness to those who suffer and might commit mistakes.

Discussion Questions

- a. The author is saying that, “The church is full of Peters today”. In what sense do you think? Reflect based on the lesson.
- b. What does the Holy Communion represent? Get others’ opinions and argue.

Conclusion

In this lesson, we sought to face one of the most difficult questions a believer might ask; where is God as millions of Christians suffer.

We saw that we knew where God is; he is there and present in their suffering. Their suffering are his, and through their suffering Christ continues to bring truth and healing to this world. We learned that being like Christ and following the path set by God is fundamental to our calling as Christians.

Yet, we also learned that we can’t do this on our own. We need Christ and His Body with us. We learned that sharing the pain of others is sharing the pain of Christ, which we are reminded of and invited to partake each time we approach the Lord’s Supper.

None of these make the pain of Christians any less or any real. But it reminds us that nothing is in vain and that with his return, we will be freed from all of our troubles in this and partake in his glory.

Christ is real, so is his promises to us and to the world. He will come back again! So even though sometimes we do not know why particular things happen, we have no one but him to turn to and set our hopes on. He is the author and perfecter of our faith, as well as the only real hope we have here now and forever.

Case Study/Learning Activity

Write a brief one page reflection on the Lord's Supper and importance of it for today's church and a theology of persecution.

Or

Case Study: Samia, an example from Algeria

"Samia gave her life to Jesus and wants the world to know her Christian persecution stories from the heartland of Algeria.

"I was a Muslim by inheritance, both by culture and obligation," Samia, whose name has been changed for her own security, told ICC. "I admit now that I was only a hypocrite to follow Islam, because Islam formed no part of my life. But, the discovery of Jesus Christ and the Gospel changed my life forever and gave it meaning. I finally found the God that I can love, worship and serve freely, because Islam was only a form of slavery."

"I became a Christian in 2007. After I saw the movie 'Passion of the Christ' I prayed, 'Lord Jesus, if you really forgive sins, show me and forgive me.' That night I had a dream. There was a man dressed in white and another in black who came to meet me. The man in white said, 'Give yourself as a sacrifice and I will raise you from the dead and give you new life.' The man in black was standing over a corpse and responded, 'Look at this dead man. He gave himself as a sacrifice and he has not risen.' The man in white showed me a lamb and said, 'Behold, the lamb was sacrificed for your sins. Give yourself as a sacrifice and you will rise again.' At that moment, I gave myself to Jesus and saw my life as a sacrifice. Immediately after, I opened my eyes and I realized that I was resurrected from the dead, without knowing how."

"Trouble and persecution began at the time of my marriage to the man I love. When his family found out that I was Christian, they did their best to cancel our marriage. They first asked him to get another wife who is Muslim. When he refused, they told him they would not attend our wedding. We got married and lived five quiet months without any troubles. But this quietness proceeded with a strong storm. My husband's brother was also a Christian. When he got married to a Christian wife, their parents realized their house was being invaded by Christians! We could feel their fear of seeing everybody converting to Christianity and we endured the rejection of the family for a month."

"After that, the parents kicked both of us out of their home which was unbearable because we had nowhere to go. But, we found a friend who allowed us to stay in a hen house he had built in another village. We lived for seven months in that hen house, but villagers and his nephew eventually found out that we were Christian. 'How dare you allow Christians here in our village?' they said to him. You must know that any person who abandons Islam is an apostate, or an unbeliever, which is a serious crime to Muslims."

"We quietly stayed another two months in the hen house because we had no money and it was a terrible crisis. Our dear friend tried to help but there was just too much pressure on him. So we eventually went home to see if the family would accept us. But the family members just insulted us, humiliated us, and even blasphemed the name of Christ. Their mouths were like volcanoes, incessantly uttering hurtful and blasphemous words at us."

The persecution became harder when they hit us. Even worse, the parents filed a complaint against us with the police. The head of police ordered us to leave the house within 15 days or they would arrest us.”

“The Lord blessed us because we found a Christian couple that allowed us to stay in their house when they were out of the country for training. For us, it was a kindness of the Lord and a great relief. We were finally able to sleep at night without fear, but it was only for a short time. During those three months, we sought the face of God, and we responded in his grace.”¹

- a- What can you say about Samia and her situation? Does it seem that God has forsaken her?
- b- If you were in Samia’s place, how would you respond to such persecution? Be open and genuine.
- c- Samia faced immense pressure from her family and neighbours to recant her faith and return to Islam. And as you see, her refusal led to ostracism from her community. *How can you* bring encouragement and comfort to Samia?

¹This story is taken from the following link: <http://www.persecution.org/crossingthebridge/>

Additional Reading

Ton, Josef: *Suffering and Martyrdom: A defining and essential Christian characteristic*, in Sauer, Christof & Howell, Richard (Eds): *Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom; Theological Reflections*. Johannesburg: AcadSa, 2010

Lesson Two Test

Choose the best answer

- 1- Our highest good is:
 - a. problem free
 - b. not problem free
 - c. a satisfying life full of pleasure
- 2- In Christianity, "*Thanatos*," the Greek word for death, signifies:
 - a. a one-time event of death
 - b. a continual process of sharing sufferings
 - c. personification (picture or embodiment) of death
- 3- For someone to understand what it means to believe in God and live in the power of the Holy Spirit, he should look at the:
 - a. Spirituality of the Church
 - b. Spirituality of Jesus
 - c. Spirituality of believers
 - d. Spirituality of Jesus, Church and believers
- 4- The silence of God means:
 - a. God is absent
 - b. God is forsaking us
 - c. God is speaking (not absent)
- 5- Through (via) the Holy Communion, one is:
 - a. Remembering the suffering of Christ
 - b. Sharing the suffering of Christ
 - c. Receiving the healing of Christ

True (T) or false (F)

- 6- Without the body of Christ, it often becomes impossible to follow Christ.
- 7- A good life is devoid of sufferings, sacrifice and self-discipline.
- 8- Sufferings and pain are not from God. Believer should live a happy life otherwise there is something wrong in his spirituality.

Open Questions

- 9- Changes in the MENA region have brought serious challenges to Christian churches. Describe the situation in your country and talk about the role of your local church in such a given society.
- 10- Is persecution a necessity to bring *life* and *glory* for God? Discuss.

- 11- The author addressed the following question: “Why bother to put trust in a God who is not fair and trustable when those who believe in Him continue to face persecution?” Answer the question reflecting on the lesson and your personal experience.
- 12- The creator of the universe chooses to sleep rough on the hills and dwell among people who persecute him. Explain.
- 13- Some say that God allows persecution to happen in our lives to bring us closer to Him. How do you read this statement? Present your personal perspective.
- 14- How might an eye to the future restoration help you sustain your current hardships (difficulties)?

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http://www.iirf.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PDFs/Sauer-Howell-Suffering__persecution_and_martyrdom.pdf

[see especially pp.199-214: Ton, Josef *Suffering and martyrdom: A defining and essential Christian characteristic*]

Cavanaugh, William T. (1998), *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ (Challenges in Contemporary Theology)*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell

Moltmann, Jurgen (2002), *A Theology of Hope*, London: SCM Press

Penner, Glenn (2004), *In the Shadow of the Cross; A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship*, Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books

