

Counting the cost of reaching Muslims

We don't really want to talk about suffering do we?

Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." (Mt 16:24-25). As disciples we need to ask a big question: Are we prepared to suffer for Christ? Are we prepared to sacrifice income, health and comfort, and possibly disappoint our families? Paul considered it a great gain to lay down his high position in the Jewish religious community and know deep fellowship with Jesus (Phil 3:9-11). For him suffering was naturally part of his ministry (2 Cor 11:21-30), and Jesus implies that suffering is normative for his followers: "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." (Jn 15:20).



Box 1: God and Suffering

Suffering is not a virtue or a sign of holiness and it does not gain credibility with God. Christ avoided suffering unless it meant acting in disobedience to the Father's will, (Mt 26:39), so when possible, suffering is to be avoided.

Many have struggled wondering if God causes suffering, but three comments can be noted:

Firstly, **our God identifies with our suffering** and willingly exposed Himself to suffering in a fallen world (eg. Phil 2). He was distressed as others suffered (eg Jn 11.35, Matt 23:37), and he himself suffered opposition, a most horrible execution, and total broken fellowship with His Father (see the Passion narratives).

Secondly, though being happy is part of the human experience which God created, **ultimately God's aim is not to bring worldly happiness**. He desires to reveal Himself to the world and for all to be blessed with a worshipping knowledge of Him. To the worshipper, this is of unsurpassed value.

Thirdly, God may not initiate suffering, but Scripture reveals that **in His sovereignty and foreknowledge He permits it** and uses it to achieve His purposes. Examples include Joseph: his brothers sold him into slavery (Gen 50:20), Job: Satan brought the disaster (Job 1-2) and Jesus' death: Judas and the authorities conspired to murder Him.

I am in awe as I read of the fate of the Twelve disciples – by tradition all but one had violent deaths as the result of sharing the Good News in various parts of the world. The next generations continued in the same vein; when put under pressure to sacrifice to other gods, many refused, and willingly paid the ultimate price. From prison Paul prayed that he would “have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil 1:20-21). Many of these people had a hope and confidence in God and his promises; their first passion was to glorify Him. The primary purpose in life was not to seek happiness. Their aims were far deeper. Their willingness to lay down their lives prompted one early church leader to comment, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” (See Box 2).



Box 2: Tertullian, church growth and restoration for those who renounce their faith.

Tertullian (c.160 – c.225 AD) was one of the early church fathers who lived in Carthage in modern day Tunisia. At times there was persecution in the city and the stories of the martyrs can still be read, including the encouraging story of Perpetua and her servant and sister in Christ, Felicitas.

Tertullian was an early defender of the faith and amongst the first writers to use the word “Trinity.” Controversially he aligned himself with a group called the Montanists, some of whom taught that renouncing one’s faith under persecution was unforgivable. We do not know Tertullian’s view on the matter, but the teaching attributed to the Montanists does not reflect Jesus’ behaviour – He forgave Peter when he denied he knew Jesus and restored him to a position of trust and leadership responsibility in the church (Mt 26:69-75, Jn 21:15-19). We cannot look in judgement on those who renounce their faith under persecution. That is between God and them.

This is what Tertullian said about persecution and church growth:

But carry on, good officials. You will become much better in the eyes of the people if you will sacrifice the Christians for them. Torture us! Your iniquity is the proof of our innocence. For this reason God permits us to suffer these things ... Yet your tortures accomplish nothing, though each is more refined than the last; rather they are an enticement to our religion. We became more every time we are hewn down by you: the blood of Christians is seed (Apology, 50, 12ff).

A few years after the persecutions in Carthage about half of the population in the region around the city professed a faith in Jesus.

The core meaning of martyr is “to witness” – and what a witness! Throughout church history the witness of men and women who have laid down their lives for the gospel has resulted in great church growth. So much so that a church statistician, David Barrett (1927-2011), considered that martyrdom was quite possibly the most effective witness for the gospel in church history. On hearing this, someone in the Christian audience wanted to know what the second most effective strategy was!

Our Western mindsets are so risk averse that we seldom consider the cost of following Jesus. This has perhaps resulted in my faith and walk with Jesus falling short of the dynamic faith of the first disciples! We often skirt around the edges and consider some negative comments about our faith at work as persecution. This can be true, and I don't want to devalue this. However, in the Muslim world the cost of following Christ can be of a different order of magnitude. Many believers from a Muslim background, and those working with them, have suffered and died for their faith. A North African pastor recently said: “Persecution is a basic teaching in our church.” In spite of the risks, his church continued to teach that Jesus is the only way. “It is a hostile environment [and] a daily challenge for Christians with a new identity from a Muslim background.” (Source: <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/persecution.is.a.basic.teaching.in.our.church.says.north.african.pastor/26931.htm>)



Box 3. An important note of balance

Often when we think of persecution and Muslims our response is one of fear or indignation. In contrast Paul encouraged us to “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse,” and Jesus told us to, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Rm 12:14, Mt 5:44). Often, in response to fear, we stereotype Muslims and see everyone as a potential persecutor.

I can only offer my experience, mirrored by that of many others: the only opposition I experienced in a Muslim village in West Africa was from a visitor who refused to shake my hand! The whole village treated me as an honoured guest and accepted me, my colleagues and the new Muslim background believers amongst them. They saw transformed lives and regarded the effect of the church as very positive indeed.

Another pastor wrote to his captors before he was murdered: "Life for me is an opportunity to serve Him, and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honour of His Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus, my Lord, ... May the shadow of God's kindness and His hand of blessing and healing be and remain upon you for ever. Amen. With Respect, Your Christian prisoner, Mehdi Dibaj" The church in his country continues to grow rapidly.

If God is leading us into a ministry to invite Muslims to follow Jesus we need to both count the cost personally and have come to a position of certainty that the blessing of knowing Jesus surpasses all opposition that the world can bring. May we rise to the challenge, count the cost and be prepared to follow our Lord into the Muslim world, no matter what the cost may be. As the writer of Hebrews (12:1-3) wrote: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Amen.

Note: This article was written by Jon, a member of the team at the Frontiers British Office.
Want to chat with one of the team? Get in touch using the details below!

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WATCH // The cost of non-discipleship

The cost of discipleship is great. It could cost us, or the people we lead, our lives. But have you ever thought about the cost of non-discipleship? In this short video, hear David Platt tell us why he believes the cost of non-discipleship is far, far greater.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOEEsS5-y9g>

READ // The Insanity of Obedience

When persecution comes, the reaction from both individuals and organisations is fairly uniform. Most believers are drawn to five specific responses. However, what if none of these responses were really Biblical?!

<http://www.frontiers.org.uk/ezone/enquirersezone/persecution.pdf>

WATCH // Radical Sacrifice

What does it mean to be prepared to give up our lives for the sake of the Gospel? Here are two inspiring video messages that talk about giving our all. They take a bit of time to watch, but it's definitely a worthwhile investment. Get yourself a drink, get comfortable, and get ready to be challenged!

Dick Brogan - Live Dead >>

<http://vimeo.com/32745710>

David Platt - The Gospel Demands Radical Sacrifice >>

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