

# Heaven for Persecuted Saints<sup>1</sup>

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Seven of the eight Beatitudes that begin the Sermon on the Mount are about the character and behavior of blessed persons. Only the eighth is about what is done to blessed persons by others: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:10). This must have been particularly significant, as it is the only beatitude given a subsequent explanatory expansion (vv. 11–12).

Clearly, the topic of heaven for persecuted saints was important in the thinking of Jesus. His basic call to discipleship was to a cross (Mark 8:34), which included losing one’s “life for [Christ’s] sake and the gospel’s” (v. 35) and of not being “ashamed of [Christ] and of [his] words in this adulterous and sinful generation” (v. 38). These both imply persecution. Included in this discourse is the promise of final reward for those who take up the cross, which is described as saving one’s life as opposed to losing it (v. 35); as not forfeiting one’s soul (v. 36); and as acceptance by Christ when he comes with his holy angels (v. 38). Paul’s statement that “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim 3:12) adds to the conviction that the Bible considers persecution to be a basic aspect of discipleship. The gospel is so radical in what it teaches that anyone living anywhere who seeks to obey it should expect opposition.

Persecution, then, is basic to the Christian life and intimately connected in the Bible with the expectation of final reward. It is one aspect of the fundamental Christian principle presented in different ways: a grain of wheat must die before it bears fruit (John 12:24); one must hate one's life in this world to keep it for eternal life (v. 25); one must follow and serve the crucified, glorified Lord in order to receive the Father's honor (v. 26); and one must enter through the narrow gate and follow the hard road along the path to real life (Matt 7:13–14).

### **The Neglect of the Topic in Protestant Christianity**

Protestant theologians, unlike Roman Catholic theologians, generally have not given the connection between heaven and persecution and martyrdom much attention. Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in persecution, given the new wave of persecution against Christians worldwide. But this has not focused much on the connection between persecution and heaven.

Romanian Christian leader Josef Ton's published doctoral dissertation, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven*, deals with this topic. He gives two reasons Protestant theology has generally avoided this topic. The first reason has historical roots. Around the third century, martyrs were so highly esteemed that they were raised to the rank of saints. "Eventually, the death of these saints was considered to have some atoning value, as the death of Christ. They were said to have the same power to forgive sins and to mediate between individuals and God. The veneration of the martyrs, transformed into the adoration of the saints, began in earnest in the fourth century AD."<sup>2</sup> Ton shows that from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries pagan accretions were annexed to martyrology. Thus, even though the Reformers valued martyrdom, when faced with the difficult task of purging martyrdom from these accretions they chose not to give the subject much prominence.

The second reason mentioned by Ton is that the discussion of persecution and its rewards seems to assume the idea of earning rewards, which gives persecution meritorious value and contradicts the doctrines of grace so fundamental to Protestant theology.<sup>3</sup> Ton sets out to reflect biblically on this theology of rewards in his book.

A more recent dissertation by Gregory Cochran helpfully argues for an emphasis on diokology rather than martyrology.<sup>4</sup> The term diokology comes from *diōkō*, the Greek verb meaning *persecution*. Though martyrs have a special place in heaven, especially in the book of Revelation, persecution in a more general sense is associated most often in the Bible with heavenly re-

ward and the cost of discipleship. As we said above, Paul viewed persecution as the lot of every Christian (2 Tim 3:12). Therefore the topic is important for all Christians. Martyrdom is the most prominent expression of persecution and, because it was a real possibility when Revelation was written, is highlighted there as a powerful representation of the cost of discipleship. So Revelation 6:11 says martyrs are given white robes, which were a sign of honor and which Jewish apocalyptic literature used to describe the glory of the heavenly reward.<sup>5</sup>

### **Does Persecution earn the Merit of Special Rewards?**

There is a clear link between persecution and heavenly reward in the New Testament, as the eighth beatitude shows. Paul asserts, “We suffer with him *in order that* we may also be glorified with him,” and “this light momentary affliction *is preparing for* us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 4:17; cf. 2 Tim 2:12). Yet the link here is that of a means to an end (instrumentation) and not of cause for an effect (causation). Our sufferings do not earn us the merit of an eternal reward; rather they are necessary experiences that those destined for glory experience. Those who reject the path of suffering for righteousness forfeit the blessedness of heaven by shunning the way of Christ, a way of suffering.

So, when talking of rewards in heaven, we must be careful to distance ourselves from the idea that the rewards are earned as a kind of merit by the person who is persecuted. At first glance we may be inclined to interpret some passages in this way. Jesus speaks of “those who are *considered worthy* to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead” (Luke 20:35). Paul says that the “persecutions” his readers “are enduring ... is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be *considered worthy* of the kingdom of God” (2 Thess 1:4–5). On the other hand, Protestant theology explains, as A. W. Tozer puts it, that “the man who believes that he is worthy of heaven will certainly never enter that blessed place.”<sup>6</sup> As the classic text goes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8–9).

We should see the word *worthy* in the two verses above as referring not to a worthiness earned through persecution but to the evidence that these are persons who will be *declared* worthy or *counted* worthy at the judgment.<sup>7</sup> The reward is something God graciously gives the persecuted and is not something earned. Even the twenty-four elders in Revelation “cast their crowns before the throne” as they “fall down before” God and exclaim, “Worthy

are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power” (Rev 4:10–11). In heaven God’s greatness and honor are incomparable, eliminating any human claim to honor, so that the symbols of honor—crowns—are surrendered at God’s feet! The greatest achievements of the faithful were achievements of grace, eliciting joyous thanksgiving to God for the privilege of participation in the work of his kingdom.

Yet there is the language of reward for faithfulness in the Bible.<sup>8</sup> A good balance is seen in the statement by English Reformer and martyr Hugh Latimer (1485–1555): “Every man shall be rewarded for his good works in everlasting life, but not with everlasting life: For it is written, *Vita aeterna donum Dei*, ‘The everlasting life is a gift of God.’ Therefore we should not esteem our works so perfect as though we should merit heaven by them: yet God hath such pleasure in such works which we do with a faithful heart, that he promiseth to reward them in everlasting life.”<sup>9</sup> I would, of course, add (as Augustine emphasized<sup>10</sup>) that even our good works are performed through the strength of God’s grace. The focus is on grace, not human achievement.

The Bible teaches that even the privilege of being persecuted is a gift from God. Paul says, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29). The word translated “granted” (*charizomai*) as used here means “to give or grant graciously and generously, with the implication of good will on the part of the giver.”<sup>11</sup> Peter adds, “For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly ... But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God” (1 Pet 2:19–20). While suffering does not act as a *cause* of earning rewards, the way to heaven includes suffering as a *means* to that end. Charles Spurgeon said, “He that has long been on the road to Heaven finds that there was good reason why it was promised that his shoes should be iron and brass, for the road is rough.”<sup>12</sup> The Bible faithfully warns us of this.

We approach this issue from the perspective that the primary purpose of biblical eschatology is neither to pander to our inquisitiveness about what will happen in the last days nor to inflame our greed for treasures in heaven but to encourage the faithful to persevere along the costly path of obedience. This function of the promise of reward in encouraging faithfulness is well described in Hebrews 10:34–35: “You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.” One of the hardest things about persecution is, as we shall see later, the shame that comes with it. Jesus, however, tells those who

are persecuted, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Matt 5:12). Instead of being ashamed, they should rejoice! Those who suffer great shame and look like fools are encouraged to remain faithful, for this is the wisest path to take, given the prospect of eternal honor as the reward for faithfulness (see below). Paul asserts: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18).

We should mention here that there was a time in the history of the church when martyrdom was such a high honor that some believers sought it for its rewards and blessings. This trend is said to have been triggered with the events surrounding the martyrdom of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, who died around A.D. 107. He “admonished Roman believers not to hinder his martyrdom, which they apparently could have done.”<sup>13</sup> So, as Gerald Sittser explains, “Some rushed into martyrdom wanting the glory of it. They bore witness to themselves more than they bore witness to the gospel.” Because of “this obsession with martyrdom,” early Christian leaders had to “establish standards for martyrdom, so that only those who were called to it, against their natural wishes, were given the title ‘martyr.’”<sup>14</sup>

### **Strength through the Heavenly Vision**

It would be true to say that persecution triggered in people a fresh awareness of heaven, which gave them the strength to encounter the worst with bright hope. Joseph Ton says, “In times of persecution and martyrdom, men and women are forced to reconsider issues of ultimate concern, particularly with respect to the nature of God and the eternal destiny of man.”<sup>15</sup>

In Philippians 1, Paul, writing from prison, mentions his hope of being released from prison (v. 19). Yet he knows he may be called to honor Christ in his body through martyrdom (v. 20). Because martyrdom would result in his going to heaven to be with Christ, he says martyrdom would be “far better” than release from prison (vv. 21–23). But, conceding that staying on would mean more opportunity to serve the people, he says release from prison is preferred (vv. 24–25). Later Paul describes the possibility of martyrdom by being “poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith” (2:17). This same expression is used in Paul’s last letter, written from prison when he was sure martyrdom awaited him: “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come” (2 Tim 4:6). Then, after proclaiming he has faithfully carried out his work (v. 7), he speaks of his hope of receiving “the crown of righteousness” from Christ (v. 8).

Jesus is even more explicit when he tells the persecuted, “Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven” (Luke 6:23). In a similar vein Peter says, “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet 4:13–14). At the moment of death, Stephen had a vision of heaven and “saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). At this time of painful rejection by the legal system of his own people, this patriotic Jew has a glimpse of acceptance by the greatest of all Jews, now reigning in heaven. This would have given him the confidence to act with Christ-like serenity, just as Jesus asked his followers to do in Luke 6:23. Once, when a martyr smiled in the flames, those who were putting him to death “asked him what he found to smile at there. ‘I saw the glory of God,’ he said, ‘and was glad.’”<sup>16</sup>

There is a long list of texts in the New Testament that present the heavenly reward as a key motivator to faithfully embracing the cross that Christians encounter. It is a list stunning in its variety, comprehensiveness, and persuasive power. Included in this list are passages that present the alternative to the heavenly vision those who shun the way of the cross will inherit: the way leading to punishment at the judgment.

- At the start of this article we saw how Jesus’s basic call to discipleship implies a call to endure persecution and the promise of eternal reward (Mark 8:34–38).
- When the Twelve are sent out on their preaching tour shortly after their selection, they are warned about rejection and persecution in the extended discourse recorded in Matthew 10. First, Jesus talks about the possibility of their message being rejected. He says it will be more bearable at the judgment for Sodom and Gomorrah than for the towns that reject his message (10:13–15). This is followed by a large section on persecution (vv. 16–28), and a key argument there is that we must “not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” Rather, we are to “fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (v. 28). Then there is a discussion aimed at encouraging them not to fear as they face various difficulties, such as rejection by their own family members (vv. 29–39). Here a key point in Jesus’s argument includes heaven: “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (vv. 32–33).
- In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus warns of the prospect of being beaten

in synagogues, standing before governors and kings, being brought to trial, opposition from family members who may even have them put to death, and of being hated by all for the sake of the name of Jesus (Mark 13:9–13). This section of the discourse concludes with the statement, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (v. 13). The salvation talked about here is the heavenly destiny of the faithful.

- Paul, in his discussion on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, says, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:19). Among the reasons why Paul could be pitied is the fact that he is “in danger every hour” and “die[s] every day” (vv. 30–31). But he will not give up this path of the cross. In fact, in view of the coming resurrection, he is able to urge his readers at the end of this discussion: “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (v. 58).
- 2 Corinthians 4:9–12 contains one of many lists of Paul’s sufferings: “We are afflicted in every way,” “perplexed,” “persecuted,” “struck down,” and “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,” for “we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake,” so “death is at work in us.” But Paul does not lose heart (v. 16). He gives three reasons for his perseverance amidst such hardship. First, he says that through his ministry people are coming to Christ and receiving salvation for the glory of God (v. 15). Second, “though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day” (v. 16). Third, he mentions his hope of heaven: “knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence” (v. 14). A few verses later he says, “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (4:17–5:1).
- In his last letter Paul describes how he is “suffering” for the sake of the gospel, “bound with chains as a criminal” (2 Tim 2:9). He says he “endures everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (v. 10). He wants them also to experience the glory of heaven. Then he says, “The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live

with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us” (2:11–12).

- In Hebrews 10, after listing the persecutions the readers suffered (10:32–33), the writer says the readers endured such persecution because of their hope of heaven: “And you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one” (v. 34). Then he urges them to persevere, keeping the heavenly reward in mind: “Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised” (vv. 35–36).
- Hebrews 11:35 says, “Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.” This is followed by a stirring list of the sufferings of people of faith in the Old Testament era (vv. 36–38).
- Hebrews 13:13–14 urges: “Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”
- In Revelation 2:10 the angel urges the persecuted church in Smyrna, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” Again there is a promise: “The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death” (2:11).
- The church of Philadelphia, which had kept God’s Word by exercising patient endurance (3:10), is urged, “Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown” (v. 11). This is followed by a promise related to the glories of heaven: “The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name” (v. 12).

The variety, comprehensiveness, and persuasive power of this list of texts, presenting the heavenly reward as a key motivator to embracing the cross, are stunning. Perhaps equally stunning is how rarely this emphasis figures in the proclamation of the church today. Perhaps this is a reaction to the pie-in-the-sky emphasis of an earlier generation that lulled people to acquiescence at times when they should have been acting to redress wrong.

But the biblical theology of persecution and heavenly reward does not lull us to inaction; rather, it drives us to a life of radical service for the kingdom.



Hebrews 10:34 mentions how the prospect of a heavenly reward helped even persecuted Christians to pursue a life of compassion for suffering people: “For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” Similarly, Paul told the Colossian Christians of “the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven” (Col 1:4–5). Commenting on this verse, John Piper says, “Hope is the great power to love people in the face of great danger.”<sup>17</sup>

In light of this neglect of such a major portion of God’s revelation, we should not be surprised that many Christians make choices that tend to avoid the way of the cross. What they think of the church is influenced by a consumerist attitude (“What is the program like in this church?”) rather than biblical commitment to the group of people called to be their body, which, of course, involves much discomfort and pain. We should not be surprised by the lack of a sharp moral edge among Christians, or by the church’s inability to motivate people to costly commitment and service. In place of a message of radical obedience motivated by the hope of glorious future reward in heaven, we seem to have chosen to entertain our flock with pleasing programs that meet their perceived wants in the present. We seem to be letting marketing approaches used in the society (“Give them what they want now”) to silence the voice of Scripture calling people to radical commitment with the promise of heavenly reward.

### **Strength through Christ’s Presence**

An important feature of the death of Stephen was his entering into what Paul described as the fellowship of Christ’s suffering (Phil 3:10). At the point of death Stephen enjoyed an intimate relationship with Jesus by being filled with his Spirit, being given a glimpse of his glory and the glory of heaven (Acts 7:55–56), and acting as Jesus did when he died (vv. 59–60). The connection between sharing in Christ’s sufferings and the heavenly hope is presented in 1 Peter 4:13: “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

The doctrine of fellowship in Christ’s sufferings is a natural extension of the doctrine of our union with Christ. Christ is a suffering Savior, and if we are to be truly one with him, we too must suffer. There is a depth of union with Christ that comes to us only through suffering. But not only do we share in his sufferings; he also shares in our sufferings. The exalted Christ, sharing in the glory of God, is not deaf to our cries of pain as we suffer; he himself suffers with us when we suffer. Paul came to understand

this on the road to Damascus when he heard Jesus ask, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (9:4). He had been hitting the church, but Christ had been feeling the pain!<sup>18</sup>

Matthew closes his Gospel with Jesus’s giving the disciples the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:18–20). Soon they would find that fulfilling this mission brings with it many challenges and much suffering. So, after giving the Great Commission, Jesus tells his disciples, “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20). Strengthened by God’s presence, they would be able to withstand whatever troubles came their way. In Hebrews 13:5, the writer reminds his readers of the promise that God “will never leave you nor forsake you.” Then the writer proceeds to say, “So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”” (v. 6). The presence of Christ helps us endure hardship that comes from people. David Livingstone often spoke of how the promise of Christ to be with him always encouraged him to persevere in his work amidst so much opposition, loneliness, sickness, and pain. He once wrote in his diary,

Felt much turmoil in view of having all my plans for the welfare of this great region and teeming population knocked on the head by savages tomorrow. But I read that Jesus came and said, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth, Go ye therefore, and teach all nations—and lo, I am with you always, *even* unto the end of the world.” It was the word of a gentleman of the most sacred and strictest honour, and there is an end on’t.

Then, after describing what he hopes to do, even though it may be the last time he will do it, he writes, “I feel quite calm now, thank God.”<sup>19</sup>

The primary pursuit in the lives of Christians is to be always deepening their tie with God. If that is intact, suffering becomes bearable. John and Betty Stam were missionaries in China who were martyred by the communists in the 1930s while still in their late twenties. John Stam once said, “Take away everything I have, but do not take away the sweetness of walking and talking with the king of glory!”<sup>20</sup>

This presence of Christ is mediated today through the Holy Spirit. Jesus gave him the name “Helper” (*paraklētōs*), which would literally be translated “one who is called to someone’s side”; that is, as the lexicon puts it, “one who is called to someone’s aid.”<sup>21</sup> It is literally translated into Latin as *advocatus*, which gives the English term *advocate*. Jesus says the Holy Spirit will play the part of a helping advocate when persecutors bring believers to trial:

“And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit” (Mark 13:11).

The presence of Christ with us also serves as a foretaste of heaven. Paul describes his experience of the Holy Spirit as the firstfruits of the heavenly hope of final redemption: “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23; cf. 2 Cor 5:2). One biblical response to suffering is to groan, but this is groaning as “in the pains of childbirth” (Rom 8:22). That is, it is tinged with the hope of heavenly redemption. The groaner, like the woman in labor, knows the pain will soon be gone. But how can we be so sure about this hope? We have “the firstfruits of the Spirit”—the daily experience of Christ’s presence with us. As the familiar song by Fanny Crosby puts it, “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh what a foretaste of glory divine!”

While there are many references in the Bible to experiencing the kingdom of God (or heaven) as a future hope, the kingdom is also described as a present reality. Jesus said his casting out demons was a sign the kingdom of God had come upon people (Matt 12:28). The Beatitudes say, of those who are “poor in spirit” and are “persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3, 10). Paul said of Christians, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13). As E. Stanley Jones says, “Jesus Christ means to me eternal life. I don’t get it hereafter, I have it now in Him. I am sure of heaven, for I am sure of Him. To be in Him is to be in heaven wherever you are.”<sup>22</sup>

The theology of groaning expounded in Romans 8 is a good antidote to quitting when the cost of obedience to God gets great. When we suffer for the gospel, we experience pain and feel bad about the way we are treated. Because of this we will be tempted to quit the way of the cross. But our theology tells us we should not be surprised about being frustrated and feeling bad, for that is a normal part of life in a fallen world (Rom 8:20). So, instead of escaping the pain by quitting, we have biblical permission to give expression to our pain in groaning (vv. 22–23).

Romans 8 gives three reasons to persevere in obedience while enduring the pain that accompanies such obedience. First, we have the firstfruits of the Spirit; that is, we experience the presence and provision of Christ (v. 23). Later, Paul waxes eloquent on how nothing, even persecution or other trials, can separate us from the love of Christ (vv. 35, 38–39). In verse 26 Paul says the nearness of the Spirit is so intense that he joins our groaning

by groaning with us. Second, we suffer in hope knowing that the pain is short-lived and will end permanently when we arrive at our eternal heavenly reward (vv. 18–19, 20–24). In fact, “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (v. 18). Third—and this is outside the scope of this paper—“We know that for those who love God all things work together for good” (v. 28), so that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (v. 37).

### **A Biblical Foursome**

In the middle of the section in the Olivet Discourse where Jesus predicts persecution for the faithful is an interjection: “And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations” (Mark 13:10). Matthew’s version adds, “and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14). The progression of history towards its heavenly destiny is closely connected with the progression of the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the world. And the proclamation of the gospel is closely connected with persecution. The commonest trigger of persecution, in the Bible and in church history, has been evangelism. Sometimes persecution triggers evangelism, as in the case of the witness of the people who were scattered after the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1–4; 11:19). We have already spoken of the close connection between persecution, the presence of Christ, and the hope of heaven.

So we see a foursome of inseparably connected features of Christian truth: (1) *Evangelism* triggers (2) *persecution*. (3) The *presence of Christ* helps us bear the persecution and gives a foretaste of heaven. (4) The *heavenly vision* helps us be faithful amidst persecution. And evangelism plays a role in bringing the historical progression of the heavenly vision to its climax.

My father, giving a report on persecution in Sri Lanka at a workshop of an international conference on evangelism said the question to ask regarding Sri Lanka was not, “Why are we being persecuted?,” but “Why are we not being persecuted?”<sup>23</sup> That was in the 1960s, when the church was experiencing what may be called “post-colonial blues.” Embarrassment over the association of Christianity with the British (from whom we got independence in 1948), plus the influence of debilitating liberal theologies, resulted in a largely nominal church that did almost no evangelism among those of other faiths. Thankfully, that scenario changed and evangelistic fervor became a feature of a large segment of the church from the early 1990s. But with that came wave after wave of persecution that is a reality even to the present. When Christians take evangelism seriously, they will call people to a sal-

vation that includes radical conversion. That inevitably invites opposition.

### **Gracious Martyrs versus Suicide Bombers**

Courage in the face of persecution for a cause and for the anticipation of a heavenly reward is sometimes found outside the Christian tradition. What has characterized the Christian response to persecution has been its perpetuation of the tradition of gracious suffering, exemplified by the first martyr, Stephen. This, as we have argued, comes out of a confidence born from an experience of Christ's love and a vision of the glory of heaven. The comparison of Christian and non-Christian martyrdom has become crucial today because of the prominence given to "suicide bombers" in recent times. During the recently concluded civil war in Sri Lanka, this was developed into an art; many prominent people were assassinated by militants willing to sacrifice their lives for their cause.

The Muslim martyrs are especially significant to this article because the promise of special blessings for martyrs in paradise remains one of the primary motivations for dying for the cause. There are *fatwas*, or legal opinions, given by jurists or religious leaders that are appealed to and promise paradise for those who sacrifice their lives as martyrs. Frequently cited in these is a verse from the Qur'an: "Allah has bought from the believers their lives and their wealth in return for Paradise; they fight in the way of Allah, kill and are killed ... Rejoice then at the bargain you have made with Him; for that is the great triumph. (9:110)."<sup>24</sup> Recent radical Islamic leaders have, in their pronouncements, promised heaven as one of the rewards of dying for the cause.<sup>25</sup>

While both Christian martyrs and suicide bombers claim to die for the cause of God and are encouraged by a heavenly vision, there are huge differences between the two. Christian martyrs die involuntarily as they are killed by the opponents of Christianity, whereas suicide bombers trigger the bombs themselves. Their aim is to destroy as many enemy targets and people as possible even as they die. Jesus, on the other hand, commands his followers, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44; cf. Luke 6:27, 35). Paul explains further: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (Rom 12:20). The last words to come from the mouth of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, are, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). In fact, Paul says, "If I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3).

Graciousness, then, distinguishes Christian martyrdom. James, the brother of Jesus, who died for his faith around A.D. 62, is reported to have said, "I beg you Lord God our Father, forgive them, for they are unaware of

what they are doing.”<sup>26</sup> In 1913 five tribe members in Toradya in Southern Celebes, Indonesia, killed a missionary but permitted him to pray first. He prayed aloud that they would be saved. Three of the murderers were converted in prison and returned to Toradya, where they founded a church that became one of the largest churches in Indonesia.<sup>27</sup>

Sadly, in the heat of conflict suicide bombers could be regarded as heroes by others. Suicide bombings have been known to encourage others to join the militant movements they represent. Gracious Christian martyrdom also serves to attract people to the gospel of Christ. In the post-New Testament period, witness became so closely linked with persecution that the biblical word for witness, *marturia*, gave rise to the word used for one who dies for his faith—*martyr*. The second-century theologian and apologist Justin Martyr “became a Christian after he had watched the brutal execution of several Christians in Rome.” Gerald Sittser explains: “He was moved by their courage and serenity, and he was intrigued by a faith that could engender such uncompromising conviction.”<sup>28</sup> Justin said, “The more we are persecuted and martyred, the more do others in ever increasing numbers become believers.”<sup>29</sup>

### **The Cry for Justice**

While most martyrs are radiant in death, all feel the sting of the injustice carried out against them. The Bible is alert to the injustice of martyrdom. And the faithful, endowed with God’s attitude of repulsion toward injustice, are also troubled by the apparent dishonor to God in the triumph of the wicked. The Bible often records the righteous’ crying out for justice via punishment upon the wicked who persecute and hurt them (1 Sam 24:12; Ps 79:10; Isa 6:11; Jer 18:21; cf. Luke 18:7). Usually these cries and prayers are those of people who are still living on earth. Revelation, however, records martyrs in heaven doing so (6:9–10) during the intermediate state, before the final triumph of Christ. Paul’s injunction to show kindness to enemies is given in the background of God’s enacting vengeance upon the wicked (Rom 12:19–20). The answer the martyrs receive to their cry in Revelation 6 is to wait a little longer until the number of the martyrs is complete (v. 11). Following this, the tables are turned and the wicked rulers cry out in despair, in terror under the hand of God’s judgment (vv. 12–17).

It is from the background of commitment to the justice of God that we should interpret the praise to God for the fall of Babylon, the great prostitute, who wreaked havoc in the world. The description ends with the words, “And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who

have been slain on earth” (18:24). Revelation gives the response to this: “After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants” (19:1–2). This is followed by more praise and three more exclamations of “Hallelujah!” (vv. 3, 4, 6).

If heaven is alert to the issue of the injustice of persecution, it is inevitable that the persecuted on earth also would be alert to it. The book of Acts shows that Paul appealed to justice in the face of persecution and did all he could to ensure he was treated justly. He even protested, when he could, about unjust treatment (see 16:37). Clearly he was alert to the fact that condoning injustice and letting it pass unchallenged is damaging to the cause of the gospel.

Similarly, today the church must do all it can to highlight and contend against persecution and work toward achieving justice for the persecuted. It must also work to ensure recognition for Christians as a legitimate unit of society, with the legal right to practice and proclaim their faith. Some believe that gaining such legal recognition was one of Luke’s main aims behind the writing of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>30</sup> Yet even when the persecuted do not get justice on earth, the assurance that justice will prevail in the end helps keep them from being bitter over the injustices they face.

### **The Shame of Persecution and Anticipating the Honor of Heaven**

The above description serves as a warning against romanticizing persecution and presenting it in a sanitized form, which neglects the pain and focuses primarily on the heroism of the persecuted. Persecution is terrible to go through, and this is why it makes the persecuted long so fervently for heaven. Even as I write, I have friends and students in Sri Lanka who live with great fear and uncertainty and have children especially terrified at what is happening around them. Glimpses of this pain are found in Paul’s lists of his sufferings, which are presented as real and painful suffering. See, for example, 2 Corinthians 11:23–27:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift

at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Paul would have had such persecutions in mind when he talked about the frustrations that affected him so deeply: “We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23). Elsewhere he says, “For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor 5:2). Heaven is presented as a place where these sufferings do not exist anymore: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev 21:4; cf. 7:14–17). So heaven is a place of great relief to suffering people, and sufferers longingly live with the hope of an end in heaven to their suffering.

The longing for escape from suffering in heaven is reflected in the prayers of many martyrs in history. Simeon, a bishop of Seleucia martyred in the fourth century, said,

Lord, grant me this crown for which I have longed; for I have loved you with all my heart and with all my soul. I long to see you, to be filled with joy, and to find rest. Then I will no longer have to witness the suffering of my congregation, the destruction of your churches, the overthrow of your altars, the persecution of your priests, the abuse of the defenseless, the departure from truth, and the large flock I watched over diminished by this time of trial.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps the hardest aspect of persecution is the shame that comes with it. This is particularly true in our more communally-oriented, so-called shame and honor cultures, where doing things that go against community values (like embracing another religion) are considered a shameful act and an attack on the honor of the whole community. The North African senator and martyr Dativus prayed before his death: “Lord Christ, let me not be put to shame. Christ, I beseech you, let me not be put to shame. Christ come to my aid, have pity on me, let me not be put to shame. Christ, I beseech you, give me the strength to suffer what I must for you.”<sup>32</sup>

The humiliation of persecution is most painful because it makes the per-



secuted look like failures and fools and their faith look powerless. But the Bible is keen to remind the faithful that taking on hardship for Christ is a wise investment, the benefits of which are of eternal duration. On the other hand, the rich farmer who had much honor on earth is called a “fool” because “the one who lays up treasure for himself . . . is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:20–21). Being called a “fool,” of course, is the ultimate expression of shame, and in this case it extends to eternity.

The awareness of the shame factor that comes with discipleship is often seen in the Bible. Peter and John “left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41). What the world saw as shame had become a badge of honor. But the greatest honor for those who experience the cost of discipleship is in the future, especially in heaven. After describing how the grain of wheat, which falls into the ground and dies, bears fruit, Jesus promises that the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternity. Then he says that those who serve him will need to follow him (to death). Then he states, “If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:24–26). In Romans 5 Paul talks about rejoicing in the hope of glory and then proceeds to talk about suffering and how God uses it to refine us. The final character that emerges from suffering is hope. “And hope,” says Paul says “does not put us to shame” (Rom 5:5).

Jesus warns believers: “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38; cf. 2 Tim 2:12). In the millennium those who were martyred and persecuted “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev 20:4). The honor of reigning is the complete opposite of the shame of being hounded by those who reigned while they lived on earth. To this we can add the many passages that talk about the shameful judgment that awaits those who reject Christ and his people (e.g., Matt 11:20–24; 12:41–42; Rev. 17–19). Luke 12:20 clearly presents the judgment of the unjust in terms depicting shame. There Jesus called the rich man, who was not rich toward God, a “fool.”

I live in a culture where corruption is rampant and where those who refuse to bow down to it but, instead, stick to biblical principles often have to struggle with the shame of failure to get what they need done. They have to work much harder than others if they are to succeed, and even after that they are not guaranteed success. In this environment the prospect of shame for the unrighteous and honor for the righteous at the judgment could be a strong factor in encouraging faithfulness to biblical principles. The doctrine

of judgment was a major motivating factor for resisting corruption and pursuing righteousness in the Old Testament (see Deut 27:25; Ezek 22:12–13; Amos 2:6–16). It could be so today too.

Hebrews 6:1–2 includes “the resurrection of the dead” and “eternal judgment” in a list of the “elementary doctrine” that provides the “foundation” for deeper teaching. The wise Christian leader today would teach these topics as basic to Christianity. We have seen that a major value of this teaching is that it encourages perseverance among those who are experiencing persecution, shame, and other forms of hardship because of evangelism and other forms of obedience to Christ. It reminds them that shame and loss resulting from obedience cannot be compared with the honor and blessing of heavenly reward for obedience. The prospect of heaven is, then, a great motivation to faithfulness in taking up the cross and following Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> This article will also be published in the forthcoming work edited by Robert A. Peterson and Christopher W. Morgan, *Heaven* (Theology in Community; Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), and it is used here by permission.

<sup>2</sup> Josef Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Romanian Missionary Society, 2000), xiii–xiv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Charles Cochran, *New Testament Persecution and the Inception of Diakology through the Application of the Regnal Righteousness Dynamic* (Ph.D. Dissertation; The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 288.

<sup>6</sup> A. W. Tozer, *Man: The Dwelling Place of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1966), 15.

<sup>7</sup> See Leon Morris, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 118.

<sup>8</sup> For a contrary view that denies a doctrine of continuing rewards in heaven, see Craig Blomberg, “Degrees of Reward in the Kingdom of Heaven?” *JETS* 35 (1992): 159–72.

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Latimer, “The Second Sermon of Master Hugh Latimer on the Beatitudes,” in *The Sermons of the Right Reverend Father in God, and Constant Martyr of Jesus Christ, Hugh Latimer, Sometime Bishop of Worcester* (London: Paternoster-Row, 1824), 156; cited in Cochran, *New Testament Persecution*, 203.

<sup>10</sup> P. F. Jensen, “Merit,” in *New Dictionary of Theology* (eds., Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 422.

<sup>11</sup> J. P. Louw, and E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 568.

<sup>12</sup> Elliot Ritzema and Elizabeth Vince, eds., *300 Quotations for Preachers from the Modern Church* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Schirmacher, “Theses on a Theology of Martyrdom,” in *Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom: Theological Reflections* (eds., Christof Sauer and Richard Howell; Bonn, Germany: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2010), 303.

<sup>14</sup> Gerald Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 319 n. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Ton, *Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* (3rd ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 49.

<sup>17</sup> John Piper, *Risk is Right* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 23.

<sup>18</sup> This paragraph depends heavily on Ajith Fernando, *Acts* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 264–69.

<sup>19</sup> William Blaikie, *David Livingstone: The Authorized Biography* (Dunbar, Scotland: Labarum, reprint, n.d.), 181.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Sherwood Elliot Wirt and Kersten Beckstrom, *Living Quotations for Christians* (New York: Harper & Row,

1974), 266.

<sup>21</sup> W. Arndt, F. W. Danker, and W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 766.

<sup>22</sup> E. Stanley Jones, *The Word Became Flesh* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1963), 382.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin E. Fernando. I believe this was at the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin, 1966.

<sup>24</sup> David Cook, "The Implications of "Martyrdom Operations" for Contemporary Islam" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32/1 (2004): 132.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Dwayne W. H. Arnold, ed., *Prayers of the Martyrs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 71.

<sup>27</sup> Schirmacher, "Theses on a Theology of Martyrdom," 307.

<sup>28</sup> Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> John W. Mauck, *Paul on Trial: The Book of Acts as a Defense of Christianity* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> *Prayers of the Martyrs*, 31.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.