

How Persecution Has Challenged the Way I Pray

By way of preface, let me answer a question that the title might have caused you to ask; no, in the area I was serving, the church was not persecuted. Many new believers did face opposition – many from within their own families – but we were able to meet together in known places and on a known schedule without fear. Our Christian health centre had a strong reputation not just locally, but throughout the country. Patients were eager for us to pray for them, and we could share from God’s word freely. In other areas, however, this was not the case. With the Christian community being as small as it is where I was serving, what happens elsewhere within their borders, as well as on the other sides of the borders, is still often very personal for the people I know. Watching the situation unfold around us – to the south, east, and west (to the north there is kinda just a lot of sand for a long way!), however, many of my local brothers and sisters expressed more and more the expectation that persecution will come to where they are as well. So, while we did not face persecution ourselves, we were not far removed from it, and many of us have been challenged in our faiths by the experiences of others.

How many of us when we face a hard time pray, “Lord, take this thing away”, “Lord, put this thing to an end”, “Lord, save me (or those affected by it) from this thing”? In years past this was certainly my approach. I would cry out for myself, for those I love, and even for those I didn’t know. I joined others in petitioning God for that which we believe to be good. We know that God is good, so He must want us to be praying for Him to spare, to deliver, to heal, etc. Right?

Right... and maybe not... I am not saying that God does not want us to pray in this way, but I wonder if in doing so we are missing the target of His heart. As humble and selfless as we seek to be, we continue to see our lives, the situations of others, and even the affairs of the world from a selfish posture. We want those we care about to be safe, be healed, be spared. We want what we think must be the best for them. I am certainly not saying that God does not want these things as well. He cares deeply for each and every one of His children. But what if His care goes beyond what we dare to see? What if what is actually best doesn’t really look that good? Perhaps we are afflicted by spiritual macular degeneration. We see that which is around us, but we miss the central point. Put another way, perhaps we are missing the forest for the trees.

In hearing stories from those facing persecution in the areas around me, this missing centre of my vision started to come into focus. One story in particular that has stayed with me is of a community who were not willing to fight back when terrorists came against them. This was not a stand against violence. Rather, this believing community knew that if they were killed, they would find themselves in Heaven. If they fought back, however, and killed their persecutors, these enemies would meet an empty end. Our brothers and sisters were so committed to God’s will for all to come to know Him, that they were willing to lay down their earthly lives rather than see their oppressors lose their lives for all eternity.

For years, with all my best intentions, I cried out for God to spare His church and for end to its persecution. After hearing such stories, however, I have been challenged to pray for the persecutors, that their hearts would bow down and know God.

A few years ago the community in which I was serving went through a very dark time. Rather than persecution by man, we experienced firsthand the need to be battling in the spiritual realms.

While many turned to Ephesians 5, I found myself turning to the books of the Minor Prophets. If you are looking for a light and joyful read, this is not the section of God's word for you! But each of these books is a reminder that God reigns victorious. These records are reminders that hard times do not take God by surprise, and that He will use them for His glory. Through stories of the pain, hardship, exile, and death of not only individual people, but of God's chosen nation, we see God's faithfulness and the accomplishment of His promises.

How does one respond in the face of such hardness? While I prayed for wisdom for the church's response to its members who were coming against it, I also dove into prayer for their deliverance from a strong bondage to evil.

Sometimes as we pray we through on the catch-all phrase, "not my will, but Yours, be done". When we pray for God's will to be done and for His kingdom to come, what are we really asking for? We know God's ultimate will; it is for all people to know Him, love Him, and receive His redemptive grace. So, as we pray for His will to be done, are we asking for God to agree with our desires or are we choosing to enter into the centre of His picture and focus on God's desire for a deep and personal relationship with all people? How many of us, looking back over our walk with God, do not share stories of how our faith grew through hard times? If we could to do it all over, would we remove the pain if it also took with it the depth of our relationship with our Lord and Saviour? Many of us would probably keep the hardship for sake of the glory that came with it. So what if in praying for the end of someone's suffering, we are denying that person the deep and personal experience with God that would be gained through that trial? Truth be told, this is where I get stuck, I hold fast to the fact that God's ways are far beyond my comprehension, and I trust that in His math, one good intention does not cancel out a much greater outcome.

Even in Canada, we are feeling more pressure on us as Christians. Persecution for our faith may come in small or big ways. But what I have learned from the persecuted church can be applied much more broadly into many scopes of our lives. Our world is being persecuted today by disease. I do not believe it is wrong to pray for protection, healing, and deliverance. God loves and cares for His children. He calls us to cast our cares on Him. We should hold up to Him our fears and anxieties. If God knows the ever-changing number of hairs on each of our heads, I'm convinced He wants to hear our hearts. But as I continue to pray for myself and my neighbours, I accept God's challenge to pray for the bigger picture. I pray that we are not enough in and of ourselves. I pray against pride, and for nations to work together. I pray that the church going on-line would draw people in who would have never entered its physical doors. In fact, I pray that God would take His time – the time that is required for many hearts to turn to His own. I pray that we, each one, would shine God's light of hope that others in darkness might see how good and how great is our God.

Here are two songs that have really spoken to me in challenging times:

1. What a Beautiful Name (Hillsong) – nothing is big enough to stand against our God
2. Even If (MercyMe) – I know that God can, but that doesn't mean that He will.