

Asia Harvest



Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe! (Joel 3:13)

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Sheep Among Wolves

- The Church in Xinjiang (Part Two) -

A Biblical View of Persecution (Part 1)

by Glenn Penner

For several issues now we have focused on Christian martyrs in China. Many people have written to express their appreciation for these testimonies, but others have struggled to understand the reasons behind persecution. Many believers have been falsely taught that following Jesus only brings blessings and happiness. Glenn Penner of The Voice of the Martyrs has kindly written an essay 'A Biblical View of Persecution' which will appear in the front of Paul Hattaway's coming book, 'China's Christian Martyrs'. Glenn has kindly allowed us to publish his essay in our newsletters, commencing with this issue. We hope you will read his words carefully and prayerfully, as they will help you to gain a deeper understanding of why Christians experience persecution.

When seeking to understand the scriptural teaching of persecution, it is important to understand, first of all, that the New Testament is not overly concerned to answer the question of suffering in general (i.e., suffering due to living in a fallen world). This is assumed. Rather, most of the passages dealing with suffering in the New Testament have to do with suffering because of *righteousness*. As I have studied many of the classic books on suffering, it is noticeable that this is hardly ever stressed. This is to be expected, I suppose, since Christians in the West have little or no experience with persecution per se.

Because the biblical texts on persecution cannot readily be applied to a setting where there is little or no persecution, the tendency seems to be for preachers to misapply these passages to situations of general physical, psychological, and spiritual suffering. This misapplication has subsequently been turned around upon the text itself. Hence, the application influences the interpretation, resulting in the typical Bible student in the West never even suspecting that the texts that deal with pain and suffering might be dealing with suffering for righteousness' sake rather than suffering because of sin.

There is a clear scriptural link between persecution and discipleship. There can be no discipleship without persecution; to follow Christ is to join Him in a cross-carrying journey of reconciling the world to the Father. That this journey is set in

the context of conflict, self-sacrifice, and suffering is alluded to as early as Genesis 3:15 when the Lord affirms that Satan's judgment, accomplished through human instrumentality, will bring deliverance to the offspring of the woman, but it will take place in a process of bruising and pain. The deliverance will come through the crushing of the serpent's head, but in the process the heel that crushes him will be bruised. This truth is illustrated in the very next chapter when the first murder takes place following an act of worship, as Cain's sacrifice is rejected by God while his brother's is accepted. In jealousy (a common reason given in scripture for persecution), Cain kills his brother. It is obvious that the New Testament views Abel's murder as much more than the result of sibling rivalry or a family squabble that got out of control. Jesus clearly saw Abel's death as an act of martyrdom (Matthew 23:35), as does the apostle John (1 John 3:12). John explains that Abel's death was because Cain's acts were evil and Abel's were righteous. Abel's death is clearly set in a context of martyrdom, a result of the conflict between the world and those who belong to God (1 John 3:13).

Persecution is hardly an exclusively New Testament phenomenon. Numerous passages refer to the suffering inflicted on the people of God throughout the historical narratives. It is likely that the psalms of lamentation address the issue of the suffering of God's people more clearly than any other portion of Scripture (including the New Testament). The thrust of Job is about how the man of God suffers not because of sin but because of righteousness and the call to trust God in the face of such a paradox. This train of thought is amplified by the call of the prophets to look ahead to the Day of the Lord, believing that history is under the control of an Almighty God who, from the foundation of the world, has set His plans in motion of reconciling the world to Himself.

All of this comes into focus with the coming of Jesus Christ, the revelation of the triune God. Through Christ, we see, among other things, that sacrificial love is in the very nature of who God is. To suffer and die to accomplish His purposes was not to be unexpected; He could not be God and do anything but. Weakness, suffering and sacrifice are God's *modus operandi*. This is how God accomplishes His work: not through strength or compulsion but through love and invitation. In the process, the Servant of God suffers and dies, as do those who follow Him. This is to be expected; this is God's way of reconciling the world to Himself. A cross-centered gospel requires cross-carrying messengers. When Jesus declared, "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*" (Matthew 16:24), we need to take His words much more literally than we are accustomed to doing.

....Continued in our next issue.

CHINA MARTYRS: Sheep Among Wolves - The Church in Xinjiang (Part Two)

We continue our look at the history of the Church in Xinjiang, China's barren northwest region dominated by Muslims. In our last newsletter we examined how Swedish missionaries established the Gospel in Xinjiang in 1892, seeing a church emerge until brutal persecution in the 1930s brought the work to an end.



Ali Akhond

Ali Akhond grew up a dedicated Muslim. He faced Mecca and prayed at the five prescribed times each day, and was careful to obey the teaching of the Qu'ran. One day Ali rode his horse into the market at Kashgar, in China's northwest region of Xinjiang. While there he overheard an old man in a dusty gray cloak telling a group of students that he would never die. Ali thought the man, a Swedish missionary, was crazy, but he was strangely drawn to his claim that he would never die, and thought about it often.

Some time later Ali obtained work at Kashgar, leaving his wife back on the farm with his elderly father. Ali intended to use his time in the city to hear lectures on Islam, but instead he came into contact with the Swedish Mission. He often went to listen to their singing and preaching.

One night a missionary stood up and read the words of Jesus from the Bible, "*I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death*" (John 8:51). Ali remembered the time he had heard the old man say the same thing at the market, and he decided to find out what the Christians meant by this saying. He accepted some gospel literature and took it home to read, but a friend threw it into the fire, warning Ali that if he read it he would become an infidel. He returned to the mission and was given the same book, but this time another friend ripped it up before Ali had a chance to read it.

Undeterred, Ali Akhond secured yet more Christian literature and over the coming months closely observed the lives of the missionaries and their converts. What he saw impressed him. Whereas many marriages among the Uygur people ended in divorce or discontent, the missionaries



Ali Akhond (left) and a Christian at Kashgar.

seemed to have genuine love and trust in their families. All of the Christians seemed to have an inner calm and joy that he longed for, and which Islam was unable to provide. A few years passed, and by this time Ali had taken a second wife. He struggled to support both wives in this polygamous arrangement. The missionaries later recalled how one day,

“it began to occur to Ali Akhond that the Swedes’ successful married life, their unselfishness, truthfulness and honesty might be due to obeying the teaching of Christ; so he began to try to follow that teaching himself. About a year later he realized he now knew for certain that Christ was alive and that Christ was God.

He saw the terrible thing that faced him. He would be cut off by his own people. But even so he decided that in common honesty he must throw in his lot with the despised Nazarene. He parted from his secondary wife, making provision for her and undertaking to support their little son who stayed with his mother. Then he asked to be prepared for baptism.”

After his public baptism, everybody in Kashgar knew that Ali Akhond had turned his back on Islam and embraced the ‘religion of the Crusaders’. Ali returned to his first wife, and after a few years she also repented and became a new creation in Christ. The transformation in Ali’s life was startling, and he could not keep the message to himself. In the mid-1920s he was appointed as a full-time evangelist by the church in Kashgar, and he led many Muslims to faith in Jesus Christ. These advances came at great cost for the gifted preacher. He was constantly harassed and threatened by his fellow countrymen, who considered him an infidel. According to one report, whenever Ali preached in a church service,

“there were always many more Muslims than Christians present, and when he preached on the Story of the Prodigal Son, he could make everyone see the handsome young boy in a striped silk coat, white turban and crimson leather boots riding away from his father’s house on a fine stallion. At Christmas there were often congregations of two or three hundred for the early morning service.”

When the persecution started in 1933 there was nowhere to hide for the Christians, and certainly not for someone with such a high public profile as Ali Akhond. The missionaries were eventually expelled from Xinjiang, and most of the new believers were murdered.

Ali Akhond was one of those who gained a martyr's crown at Kashgar. He had found God after seeking for him with all his heart, finally discovered the true meaning of what the missionaries had taught years before. He had kept the words of Jesus, and as a result never experienced spiritual death.

Habil and Hava

Habil and his sister Hava lived next door to a school run by the Swedish missionaries in Yarkant. Their father, Tokht Akhond, was a carpenter by trade. When Habil (Abel in English) was ten-years-old and Hava (Eva) was four, their mother suddenly died.



Habil and Hava at Yarkant in 1932.

This sad event threw the family into turmoil. The father went into huge debt to a Chinese opium smuggler.

Two years later, in 1926, more heartache was added to the children when their father died. That same night the opium smuggler came to take Habil and his sister into slavery as payment for their father's debts. The children ran to the school and begged the missionaries to save them.

The Swedes did not have the kind of money owed to the creditor, but they devised a plan to protect and keep Habil and Hava. Habil had attended classes at the mission school for a number of years, but his father had not been able to pay the fees. The missionaries used this as a way to claim the children. They lodged a legal petition claiming the mission was owed a sum of money for unpaid fees. In return, they had accepted guardianship of Habil and his sister, and considered the debt paid in full. Because of his shady dealings, the opium smuggler did not dare contest the claim in court. The children were spared.

Gradually the grief-stricken children grew to love the Swedish missionaries. Habil enjoyed playing soccer, and proved better at the sport than other boys much older and larger than himself. He also enjoyed bird-watching. Little Hava came to love Gerda Andersson, who was in charge of the Girls' Home.

In 1931 a great evangelist named Yusuf Ryekhan came to live in Yarkant and revival broke out among the Muslim population. Several of the young men connected to the mission put their faith in Christ and were baptized. Habil was one of them. In a Muslim society baptism is the point of no return for someone interested in Christianity. Habil knew it

would cost him his friends, reputation and possibly his life, but he did not care. All he wanted to do was follow Jesus. The missionaries were greatly impressed by Habil's zeal and hunger for God, and at the end of 1932 he was invited to become the assistant principal of the mission school at Kashgar, even though he had only just turned 19.

Yarkant was overrun by the Khotan rebels on 11 April, 1933. Just before the road between Kashgar and Yarkant was cut off, Habil returned to Yarkant so he could take care of his sister. Hava was then 13, and many young girls and women were being raped and carried off by the rebels. The Swedish missionaries were rounded up and eventually expelled from Xinjiang, and the rebels turned their attention on those ex-Muslims who had deserted Islam.

Sensing the storm that was about to break, Habil drew a cross on a mud wall, and asked a Christian boy named Mehmen Niaz, "Do you see that?"

"Yes," the boy replied.

Then Habil drew a crown. "And do you see that? You see the cross comes first and then the crown."

That afternoon Habil and the other Christian boys prayed together, asking God to strengthen them for the ordeal ahead. Habil wept and prayed for courage to be faithful to his Savior in life and death, like Stephen. Suddenly while they were singing a hymn, a shout went up to run. Soldiers surrounded the building and only one boy managed to escape. The Christians were roped together and taken to the governor's house, where Abdullah Khan had taken residence. Abdullah stuck Habil over the head and yelled, "Shoot them all!" At the same time the wicked man signalled to a soldier that Habil should be separated from the others and untied.

Habil knelt down and looked up to heaven with a peaceful look on his face. Then he looked across at his friends as if to bid them good-bye. The order was given, 'Fire!' Habil fell to the ground and Abdullah shouted, "Finish him off with your sword."

The soldiers began to thrash the prisoners until two of the boys called out, "Shoot us, too, and put us out of our pain." When he had wreaked his anger on them, Abdullah had the Christians bound and sent to prison, and ordered that Habil's body be thrown out for the dogs to eat. After it had remained untouched for three days, some Muslims buried it.



Habil at the age of 12.

About a week later, Abdullah Khan ordered the 13-year-old Hava to come to the governor's mansion. The believers prayed for her, afraid the wicked man planned to vent his lust on the pretty young girl's body. Just after sunrise the next morning Hava returned to the school and sank down on the floor. After wiping the tears from her eyes, she bravely recounted what had happened the previous night. The evil man locked the door and told Hava, "Now, you shall be mine!" Hava begged to be killed, so she could join her brother in heaven. Abdullah Khan was surprised to hear that the young girl was the sister of the man he had shot dead. Somehow this plea managed to touch even Abdullah's hard heart, and he allowed her to go free as long as he was provided another Christian girl in her place. That dreadful experience fell to a young lady named Buve Khan, who became Abdullah Khan's wife.



Hava and the other Christian girls were forcibly married off to Muslim men. The man Hava was forced to wed suffered from syphilis and she soon contracted the disease and also fell pregnant. The baby died at birth. Gerda Andersson was still in Yarkant at the time, and she heard what had happened to the beloved girl. The Swedish missionary sent a cart to Hava's house and collected her at the point of death, nursing her day and night until she recovered.

Having suffered the deaths of her mother, father, brother and newborn baby, young Hava's heart was crushed by the evil she had endured. Through the love and tears of the other Christians who survived, Hava continued to walk with the Lord, but several years later she died from the strain of the ordeal. She had not yet turned twenty.



Introducing a New Project: **The Southeast Asia Bible Fund**



For the last several years we have focused our efforts on printing Bibles inside China for the house church Christians. We are thankful to God for the tremendous response, and the total number of Bibles printed and delivered is now approaching 900,000.

There are great needs for Bibles in other parts of Asia. The Communist nations of Laos and Vietnam contain more than 250 different tribes, dozens of which had full Bibles or New Testaments translated into their languages prior to the establishment of Communism in 1975. Since then, these believers have been deprived of Scriptures in their

languages because their governments oppose the spread of Christianity and Bible printing is illegal. A slightly different situation exists in the country of Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), which is ruled by a brutal military dictatorship. There the need for the Word of God in a variety of languages also remains critical. In some cases, missionaries labored for years translating the Word of God for a tribe, only to have their work cut short by the change of government.

Through coworkers in Southeast Asia, we are now relaunching this important and needy project, which we have called the **Southeast Asia Bible Fund**. Our aim is to print the Scriptures in a number of different languages as the need arises. In the past, Asia Harvest has been involved with printing and delivering **31,550 Bibles or New Testaments into 17 different Southeast Asian languages**, namely Burmese, Lao, Hmong Daw, Bana, Khun, Mnong, Vietnamese, Khmu, Raglai, Co, Akha, Chinese, Koho, Wa, Tai Dam, Bru, and Sgaw Karen.

The structure of this project needs to be a little different from the China Bible fund, as the cost of each Bible will vary from one language to the next, but the average cost will be \$2.70 per Bible. We plan to provide information about the

various people groups and languages that will be assisted through the project in our future newsletters. This will enable you to join in prayer for the successful implementation of each of them.

Please pray for the Southeast Asia Bible Fund, and for the many people groups who are perishing without God's Word. If you would like to help print Bibles in Southeast Asia, please fill out our Response Form and send it into us with your gift. All donors are sent a receipt, while in America all donations to Asia Harvest are tax-deductible.



Tribal Christians in Asia carrying boxes of Bibles back to their villages.

CHINA CHILDREN'S PROJECT

Current Total: 1,576 Children's Bible Teachers Trained and Equipped.



Thank you for the generous response to this strategic project to reach China's children for Christ. Each teacher, on average, is expected to teach 100 children and establish them in the Word of God. Teachers attending the training have their travel costs covered, and a set of materials given to them for free. These materials include a children's Bible, teacher's manual, 18 teaching books with visual aids, 15 hours of VCD (video cassette disc) teaching, and six CDs of 'Children's Heavenly Songs'. **The total cost of \$47 per set** includes printing and production, and training expenses.