

Suffering Persecution and Martyrdom in Turkey

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(Translated by Marion Dawn Lewis)

On April 18, 2007, some terrible news shook and changed the course of the missionary movement in Turkey forever. I was driving my car to the service of the funeral of a dear brother's father when I got the call. It is not advisable to answer such a call when one is driving. Just after the incident occurred, this brother, A.S., was telling me, "Three of our brothers from Malatya have been killed, they have been slashed by the throat!" More calls followed, "Are you sure? Who are they? But, how? Misinterpretations rose, "Four were killed, not five; no, they are not dead; yes, they are all dead, but one..." One of the first persons I called was the pastor from our church in Izmit, brother in law to one of the victims. From the vague news, I tried to comfort him, reassuring him that he was still alive. But, the fatal truth was about to come...

The media were already there by the time I arrived to the church I headed to. They wanted to know our reaction. However, we did not count on precise information. The only words that I could say in front of TV cameras were: "We do not have accurate facts of what happened. We have little to say. However, it is extremely alarming that Christians in this country live fearing to get killed."

After the hideous killings of our brothers, Necati Aydin, Ugur Yucel and Tilman Geske, three questions came to our minds: Why did God allow this? What is the Lord going to do? In addition, how should we react?

After the assassination of Armenian journalist and believer, Hrant Dink last January, we began to expect the worst to happen. Just some months earlier, in the spring of 2006, a young man had killed Andrea Santoro, a Catholic priest, in his church at Trabzon by the Black Sea Coast.

That January, I was exchanging emails with other Latin-Americans brothers who served in the country. We were trying to schedule a conference in October and find an appropriate theme to be addressed. Among other proposals, I suggested, "Besides, 'the great cloud of Latino witnesses' that have seen the impact of their efforts, what else could encourage us than, 'to struggle to the point of shedding our blood'? (He.12:1-4). In some way, if we want to leave a mark in the history of God's work and in the world, we have to communicate that it is and it will be necessary that both, agencies and missionaries be willing to be the seed that dies to bring life." Sadly, three months later these thoughts became a reality...

Since then, the most common question has been, "Why did God let this happen?" Everybody makes this logic and normal question. But, little by little the Lord has led me to think that the Christians from the first century didn't make that question when dying by faith was an everyday issue. They did not regret martyrdom but looked for it as a glorious

goal. I am not saying that this should be our attitude, but something that has substantially changed our perception of faith, Christian life and mission.

As all well know, the word “martyr” as found in the New Testament, means witness and “martyrdom”, testimony. Both became so inseparables (martyrdom and testimony), that in Christian vocabulary changed places.

Ignatius Martyr, Bishop to Antioch (Southeast of Turkey) was condemned to die in the beginnings of the second century (117 A.C.). In his way to Rome (where the sentence was to be served), he begged the seven churches not to take that honor from him. He feared that his brothers hindered him to fulfill his penaltyⁱ. It is not about beatific literature or masochism, but the spirit of the early church. The church that transformed the world and offered the fundamentals to a victorious Christianity that prevailed and held out the outburst of time and its internal degradation.

If we address mission, we address death. I wish my dear brothers have not had died, or in some way prevent or spare their slaughter. I wish no widows were left, or a bride who was about to say “I do”. I wish five children would not grow up regretting their loss... Nevertheless, we must keep considering death and life of course! Because the message that we communicate, the message that we believed and is part of ourselves, gives us a life not one can take away, a life every human being longs for deep inside.

But Scriptures demand us to, “Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, ARM YOURSELVES ALSO WITH THE SAME ATTITUDE...” (1 Peter 4:1) In his first Epistle, Peter mentions the words “sufferings”, “afflictions”, “offense”, and “insults” 23 times. Nevertheless, his message is one of hope, “He cares for you” (5:7), and at the same time a real one, “...your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” To embrace suffering and the possibility of martyrdom is not (it should not be) a curb but a weapon. Against what? Against death... Does it work? It works because it defeats fear. So many times, fear feeds more from uncertainty, the unknown, or expectations, than from hurt or pain, which dissuades it. If we expect the worst, whatever happens will always be better.

However, it is not necessary to die and suffer the martyrdom for faith. The mission is death because it requires self-denial. It requires from us to take the risk (in human terms), to deny ourselves and to deny our essence. To deny our culture, our comfort, our future, our sons and daughters, our goods, our most important brothers and sisters, our plans, our investment in time, prayer, traveling, and media... If we only assume the maximum cost, everything else will seem small and little before the big enterprise.

Only then, our questions before the worst will begin to recover the savor of the first century of Christianity. Instead of asking, “Why God let this happen?” we should ask ourselves, “Lord, why did not you let me die?” Or, even better, “Why am I still alive? Why am I still here? What life I should live and what mission I should accomplish?” or, “Why have not I died to my ego? Why have not I died to my comfort, my small world, mi worldly vision of life, my fear of giving it all? Why have not I died to those hindrances within me or around me that stop me from giving my life for the Gospel?”

What will happen next? “Unto you therefore which believe he is precious” (1 Peter 2:7) Again, Jesus Christ will become precious to our eyes! Again, He will become everything to us. Again, He will be our first love... Don’t we yearn that?

The second question we ask is, now what is the Lord going to do?

Right after the killings, some started to predict, “Now is time for a revival!” I do not dare to say when the perfect time for a revival is. I think we should give it a thorough thought. God reaches and transforms the world through three different ways, 1) The Holy Spirit who convicts the world of sin (John 16:7-9); 2) The message preached by the saints (1 Corinthians 1:21); 3) Interceding prayers from His people (Colossians 4:3). When these three means are not enough due to the hardness of the spiritual ground, the Lord adds a fourth element, the martyrdom of believers! Then, their blood becomes, “the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:24 and Matthew 22:35). I understand that sometimes the only way to redeem the sins of a certain group (not as a substitute, but as a carrier of the message) is to suffer such injustice until God breaks down the hardened hearts in view of the terrible facts. Thus, God wants to increase the intensity of His mercy and permits atrocious reactions... until the terrible shock breaks the dam. In times of Roman repression, Cornelius Tacitus (55-117 A.C.) in view of the horror of persecution, says, “...Hence, even for criminals (the Christians) who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion...” (Annals XV, 44).

For the first time in the recent history of Turkey, the national press is denouncing incongruities in the investigation, destroyed or manipulated evidence, and the biased indictment presented by the Public Prosecutor in the murderers’ trial in Malatya. For the first time, a unanimous voice is being raised to find the underlying cause of the investigation and to punish, not only the perpetrators, but also those that from behind incited and are the intellectual authors of such atrocities. Furthermore, for the first time the media are exercising a thorough examination of consciousness and accepting their guilt for the many years of Christian anti-propaganda pervading the public opinion of this country. In addition, they accept their guilt for spurring on the most radicals groups to increase hate against Christians.

Around 1995, Turkish Evangelical Christians, converted from Islam started to appear on TV debate programs witnessing their conversion and faith. Their testimony was one of people really convinced of their faith, being of sound mind and body. They didn’t speak as if they were deceived or manipulated by hidden and political Western interests. The constant attack from the media accusing Christians of plotting against the Government has not ceased since then. The children from those times have grown fearing and hating Christians, now adults.

What is the Lord going to do now? I dare to say that the only way to surpass this threshold of hate would be through the blood of martyrs. For months, many of us have been saying that the horror of these murders instead of calming down the spirits, stirs up more and more people who feel should be heroes and saviors of their country. A week ago visiting Germany, I was just saying this when we got the news that a Catholic priest has been stabbed in Smyrna. I’ve known him personally and I wished him a soon recovery. Later, the press revealed that, “The young man didn’t mean to stab the priest but the pastor from

the Evangelical Church in Eskisehir!" This is the church where I belong and pastored! The same church where we have been attacked with Molotov bombs during 2007!

I firmly believed that the Lord is not only permitting this, but He is going to use this to break in pieces the hard shell that is covering the hearts of so many in these lands; lands that seem impenetrable due to the historic, social and spiritual reasons. However, unquestionable is what the Lord wants us to do today. Finally, we approach our last matter:

What should be our reaction?

Within the vast range of Christians, some would say, "demand justice and appeal to all possible governmental offices." Others would say, "Turn the other cheek..." I think both reactions are faces of the same coin. What is important is how we react. In the first case, do we react with resentment? In the second case, do we react in submissiveness? In both cases, we should react with love, faith and hope!

Three years ago, I was called to the police headquarters in Istanbul to be interrogated. When I was giving my testimony, a superior officer shouted from time to time from his office, "Don't let him invent those things"! I couldn't bear no more and at one point I also shouted at him very upset, "It seems you know better than me, why don't you come here and testify and sign instead of me!" I felt like a twinge in my heart, right after, "Had the Lord reacted like me?" The Lord answered me that same week, "Let him offer his cheek to one who would strike him, and let him be filled with disgrace." (Lamentations 3:30) Moreover, "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting." (Isaiah 50:6) Also, "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?" (John 18:23).

In other words, we have to learn how to cope with aggressions without undermining our faith, our love and devotion; and at the same time we have to keep demanding from public powers and by all means, "Why, why, why... ?" Until we get their attention and reaction. To make a difference we need action, interceding prayers and help from all believers around the world!

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ⁱ "I write to all the churches, and I bid all men know, that of my own free will I die for God, unless ye should hinder me. I exhort you, be ye not an unreasonable kindness to me. Let me be given to the wild beasts, for through them I can attain unto God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts that I may be found pure bread [of Christ]." Translation by Lightfoot.