

“The End of the Spear”

Acts 5:12-26; 27-42 ¹

Many of you have read the book, *90 Minutes in Heaven*, which recounts Don Piper’s experience of being killed in a car accident and being miraculously returned to this life an hour and a half later.² Don’s description of his time in heaven is extremely powerful and encouraging; yet as I continued to read the book, with its lengthy descriptions of the horrible suffering Don experienced while his body was put back together over a period of months, I kept asking myself, “Why are you telling me all this? This is not edifying at all!” Well, there was a point to that telling that relates to this message, and I’ll come back to it after a while.

Many of you also recognize the title of this sermon as the title of the 2006 film retelling the martyrdom of Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully and Roger Youderian on January 8, 1956.³ These men were killed by the Auca Indians in South America while they were trying to take the Gospel to that tribe. Their widows and children, together with a great many other believers since, wondered why that happened, and I’ll say more about that later, too.

Our journey through the Bible brought us last week to the book of Acts, and I discovered that there is so much power in the passages of Acts on which I’ve never before preached that I’m going to do a series of eight sermons from Acts over the next several months. Since today is the annual International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and since the record of that persecution begins in Acts, that’s our focus this morning.

It didn’t take very long at all for the persecution of Christians to begin, and Jesus had told His disciples it would be so: “*If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first*” (John 15:18). The first chapter of Acts describes Jesus’ commission and ascension; the second chapter describes the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; the third chapter tells about the apostles’ teaching and healing; and persecution begins in chapter 4.

As our text begins in chapter 5, the disciples have become enormously popular with the people, and we’re told that the religious leaders of Israel were “*filled with jealousy*” about their growing influence (5:17).⁴ The Jewish leaders found a pretext to have the apostles arrested, but angels released them in the night and they returned to their preaching the next morning. Arrested a second time, the apostles were badly beaten and told not to speak in the name of Jesus; but “*the apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. And every day, in the Temple and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message: ‘Jesus is the Messiah’*” (Acts 5:41-42).

Chapter 6 tells the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who was also one of the first seven Deacons. Paul, who was an accomplice in Stephen’s martyrdom (7:57-8:1), later became a follower of Jesus himself and suffered intense persecution over many years. As he put it, “*Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned [and left for dead]. Three times I*

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on November 8, 2009.

² Don Piper, *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death & Life*, with Cecil Murphy (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004).

³ *The End of the Spear* (Every Tribe Entertainment, 2006), written by Bill Ewing, Bart Gavigan and Jim Hanon, directed by Jim Hanon, produced by William Bowling; on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of these events.

⁴ Jealousy has a long history in creation. Satan’s temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 grew out of jealousy, as did Cain’s murder of Abel in Genesis 4. There are many other examples.

was shipwrecked. *Once I spent a whole night and day adrift at sea* . . . and the list could go on and on (Acts 11:23-28).

Again, this was not a surprise. After all, Jesus had ended what we call the Beatitudes with these words: *“God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way”* (Matthew 5:11-12).

And today is the International Day of Prayer for Persecuted Christians because those very same kinds of things may be more common in our world today than at any time since the first century. As we sit here this morning, Christians are persecuted in more than fifty countries around our world.

Some of you will remember that I’ve begun wearing interlocking wrist bands that remind me to pray for fellow believers who are in such suffering.⁵ One of these bands says “Bound with Them,” and the other says “Hebrews 13:3”: *“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body”* [the Body of Christ]. Here are a few recent examples:



This July, police came over the walls of a Mennonite church in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), swinging clubs and nunchuks against the defenseless Christians. But the pastor of that church, Pastor Quang, who has been in prison five times for telling others about Jesus, was undeterred, and he now “has a Bible school of twenty-nine tribal students and eighteen Vietnamese students from areas across Vietnam that are hostile to Christians. Along with a full Bible curriculum, they are taught from the Book of Acts and other sections of Scripture that suffering persecution for Christ is to be expected.”⁶

On September 21, about six weeks ago, Pastor Manuel was shot and killed by The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in San Jose del Guaviare, Colombia. FARC guerrillas made an appointment with Pastor Manuel and his family. He thought they were going to authorize him to have a church officially, which he had discussed and asked for before. One of the guerillas came in the house with the pastor’s wife and family.

Pastor Manuel was shot six times, after which his wife ran outside and cleaned her husband’s face, and, with the help of her children, dragged his body under a tree. She then ran and got her Bible and, shaking with tears, preached to all those who dared to come near. Her ten year-old son said “Mum, don’t worry, Dad died for Christ and now he is with Christ.” Just last April, Pastor Manuel had been part of an evangelistic event at which three FARC guerrillas and seven members of the paramilitary militia accepted Christ.⁷

On October 20, less than three weeks ago, Chen Le, a Chinese high school student, was expelled from Xinjiang High school for refusing to denounce his faith. He was expelled after he signed a document confirming that he was a Christian. His expulsion means that Chen Le will be forbidden to take college entrance exams. Here’s part of the expulsion notice:

⁵ Bracelets may be ordered at

www2.vombooks.com/qry/qe_store.taf?function=detail&_peid=951&_id=AB93579651&code=P&nc=4932ea559fa4a3cdeeaadf1e08db1def

⁶ Tom White, *The Voice of the Martyrs*, November 2009, 2.

⁷ http://www.persecution.com/public/newsroom.aspx?story_ID=MTky

Chen Le . . . from Class 8 of Senior High School, was found by Bazhou Public Security Agency and other related agencies to have engaged in Christian gatherings. His school was notified that it should educate the student and persuade him to mend his ways. However, efforts from the class advisor and some leaders from the school in educating him have all failed and this student persists in his belief that he should not renounce his Christian belief. He can't promise that he will not believe in Christianity or attend Christian activities.⁸

Pastor Trang is called the “Running Pastor” by other believers because he runs ahead of the police who try to stop him from evangelizing across six remote provinces in northern Vietnam. He became a Christian by listening to shortwave gospel broadcasts from Far East Broadcasting Company thousands of miles away.

According to *The Voice of the Martyrs*,⁹ “The area where Pastor Trang ministers is about 60,000 square kilometers—the size of West Virginia. Here is a portion of his testimony:

“ ‘When I read the scripture “*Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel*” in 1 Corinthians 9:16, it burned into my heart, and I made a promise to myself that at every opportunity I would share the gospel.

“ ‘In December 2007, I attended a secret Bible training course. There was a poster on the wall showing the bloodied hands of Jesus. Traveling all the way back home, this poster was constantly on my mind. I wanted to pay “my love debt” to Jesus and decided that I would go back to my people [the Dao] and preach the gospel to all those who do not know who Jesus Christ is.

“ ‘On December 17, 2007, together with my fellow-believer Brother Van, we visited Co Com hamlet, Yen Lam village, Tuyen Quang province. Living in this hamlet were fifty families who had never heard the gospel. We shared with them for two hours, telling them of Jesus’ love for them, that He loved the world, that He became a man and died to “pay our debt of sin.” That day six families accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

“Trang and Van also spoke to the chief of the village and told him they wanted to share the gospel with him. He said he would like to hear it but that first he had to check with the district officer. He left and was gone a long time. When the chief finally did come back, he brought six policemen with him.

“ ‘We were taken to the police station, and then the interrogation started,’ said Pastor Trang. ‘They asked many questions and searched my bag. . . . I told them I was the leader and that I was the one sharing the gospel—that my friend did nothing. They hit me so hard in my face that I fell down. Then they grabbed me by my collar and continued hitting me in my stomach. All the time this was happening I was praying to the Lord to help me and strengthen me so I could endure the suffering.

“ ‘They arrested us, keeping us in a cell for one night. During the night my thoughts went back to the Bible training class and the poster I had seen with the bleeding hands of Jesus. I am now even more determined to continue my duty to preach the gospel, just as the Apostle Paul said.

“ ‘On the morning of December 18, 2007, they fined us 200,000 dong [US\$10] and then released us. At that time I remembered the Bible verse, “*And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ*” (Acts 5:41-42).”

⁸ http://www.persecution.com/public/newsroom.aspx?story_ID=MTk3

⁹ www.persecution.com

As of this year, Pastor Trang reports that “I now care for thirty-one house churches, with more than 2,000 believers. I have opportunities to witness and preach the gospel to the Dao, Nung, Tay, Hmong and San Chi tribes. My coordinator told me that I had ‘a runner’s ministry.’ Yes, I continue to run for my Lord.”¹⁰ Because of pastors like Pastor Trang and other believers who are willing to face persecution, more than 600,000 Vietnamese have put their faith in Jesus in the remote Northern provinces in the last twenty years.¹¹

To return to where we began, if you stick with reading *90 Minutes in Heaven*, you eventually come to the third section of the book where Don Piper discovered how God was using his suffering to prepare him for an intense and rewarding ministry he could never have imagined. And the story of the Auca martyrs had a similar surprise along the way.

It was 1986, and Steve Saint, son of martyr Nate Saint, was on a fact-finding mission for Missionary Aviation Fellowship in West Africa. Steve had been fascinated for years by the fabled desert city of Timbuktu, in the West African nation of Mali. Since he wasn’t terribly far away, Steve managed to hitch a ride to Timbuktu on a UNICEF plane, but he got stranded there and his life was in significant danger.

“Suddenly I had a powerful desire to talk to my father,” Steve wrote, “but my father, Nate Saint, was dead. He was one of five missionary men killed by Auca Indians in the jungles of Ecuador in 1956. Thirty years later, my own faith was still uncertain. I was still troubled by why my father had had to die. I found myself saying, ‘God, I’m in trouble here. Please keep me safe and show me a way to get back. Please reveal yourself and your love to me the way you did to my father.’

“There was no bolt of lightning, but I suddenly remembered that someone had told me of a tiny Christian church in this hostile Islamic fortress. After much questioning, I found myself talking with Nouh Af Infa Yatara, and I asked him how he became a Christian.”

“One day when I was a small boy,” Nouh answered, “a friend and I tried to steal some carrots from the garden in this missionary compound. We were daring, but we were afraid, because we had been told that the white men ate little children. But Mr. Marshall, the missionary, didn’t eat us. He gave us the carrots, and also some cards with Bible verses on them. He said that if we learned the verses, he’d give us ink pens. When I showed my pen at school, the teacher knew I had been talking to a white man, which was forbidden, and he beat me severely.

“My parents threw me out and forbade anyone else to take me in. I was not allowed in school. When she saw that I had become a Christian, my mother tried to poison me. The poison didn’t hurt me, although my brother is still paralyzed from some of it he got by mistake. My life is still dangerous, even now.”

Steve asked Nouh, “Where did your courage come from?”

“Mr. Marshall couldn’t take me in without putting me in great danger,” Nouh answered. “So he gave me books about other Christians who had suffered for their faith. My favorite book was about five young men who risked their lives to take God’s good news to stone-age Indians in the jungles of South America. The book said these men let themselves be speared to death, even though they had guns and could have killed their attackers! As a matter of fact, one of those men had your last name.”

¹⁰ White, “Pastors on the Run,” 6-7.

¹¹ Tom White, “Pastors on the Run,” *The Voice of the Martyrs*, November 2009, 3.

“I know,” Steve said quietly. “That man was my father.”¹²

As he later reflected on that conversation, Steve wrote, “Nouh and I had given gifts to each other that no one else could give. I gave him the assurance that the story that had given him courage was true. And he, in turn, gave me the assurance that God had used my father’s death for good. By his own death, Dad had helped give Nouh a faith worth dying for. And Nouh, in return, had helped give Dad’s faith back to me.”¹³

My friends, God is much at work in our broken and despairing world, drawing the lost to Himself as the firstfruits of the New Creation; and thousands upon thousands are coming to faith in Jesus, even if their faith comes at the cost of their lives. You and I are not likely to face such suffering, though our nation becomes more hostile to Christian faith year by year. We, who are not suffering for our faith, are called to “*Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body*” [the Body of Christ; Hebrews 13:3].

On this Day of Remembrance, I invite you to join me in praying for these suffering friends whom we will never know until we join them around God’s Throne. Prayer is more powerful than we imagine or can understand. Later in Acts, when Peter was in prison again, with his life in the balance, the church in Jerusalem prayed earnestly for him. God sent an angel who released Peter from his chains that bound him to two different soldiers that he might continue to preach the Gospel (Acts 12:1-19; though we’re told that Peter, too, was eventually martyred).

As we consider such prayer for the persecuted, one practice that I’m finding helpful is to pray for persecuted believers whenever I feel physical pain of any sort, however great or small, whether in the night or during the day. Whenever our relatively minor pains come, we may be confident that sisters and brothers in Christ are suffering for their faith somewhere in our world at nearly that same moment. Our own pain becomes transformed as we let it become a call to intercession . . . intercession that changes things both in time and in eternity. And for this, we thank God!

¹² www.truthorfiction.com

¹³ Story verified on www.truthorfiction.com.