

CHAPTER 15

PERSECUTED FOR CHRIST IN PERSIA: PAST AND PRESENT

Persecution - physical abuse, no, that's not for me! However, read this verse. "Or it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for Him." (Philippians 1:29) Suffering for the Persian church in Iran is part of the normal Christian life of the believers. That's right, those who live in the western world might be subject to verbal abuse occasionally because of their faith, but that's nothing compared to what believers in most of the world face when they are abused verbally, physically, and even martyred.

A. HERE IS THE WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE!

Jesus in the Beatitudes said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil things against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in Heaven for in the same way they persecuted the prophets which were before you." (Matthew 5:11, 12)

Hebrews 11 is known as the great chapter of faith and tells us that by faith Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses and others saw great miracles wrought by God as they served and followed Him and as God delivered them. However, have you ever noticed the last part of the chapter beginning at verse 35? It says, "Others were tortured and refused to be released so that they might be in a better resurrection. Some faced jeers, flogging, while others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they were put to death by the sword. They went around in sheep skins and goat skins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground."

Why does God allow such persecution? A vibrant church such as the Persian church is often purified by intense persecution. When Christians are persecuted to the point of martyrdom, God uses this to bring others to himself. Old Testament people who were martyred include Abel (Gen 4:8) and Zechariah (2 Chronicles 20:22, Matthew 23:35). If we look in the New Testament we find the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:57-60). Peter had a marvelous escape from prison as he was helped by angels (Act 12). However, in the same chapter James, the brother of John, was put to death by King Herod. God's purpose was accomplished for both of them. Revelation 7:9-14 tells us about a multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language who came out of the great tribulation and have washed their robes white with the blood of the lamb.

B. PERSECUTION OF PERSIAN BELIEVERS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Robin E Wakefield in his book, Christians in Persia, on pages 19 and 21 gives examples of how the Persian believers were persecuted in the early centuries.

"In 340 the Persian king Shapur informed church leaders they must pay the taxes they collect from Christians." When the Christian leader Simon Bar Sabbae refused. "He was summoned to

the court and given a final chance to agree. He again refused saying: 'I am no tax-collector but a shepherd of the Lord's flock.' On Good Friday, 17 April 341, he and about 100 other Christians, including many clergy and some monks and nuns, were put to death. The long martyrdom of the Persian Christians had begun. This persecution lasted for almost forty years with scarcely any remission, and was borne with remarkable fortitude."

In the year 440 under the reign of king Yezdgerd II Wakefield writes, "On 24 and 25 August 446 Christians from a number of provinces, including the bishops, senior clergy and many members of distinguished families, were collected at Karka (modern Kirkuk) and put to death. They met their martyrdom with great courage. The way in which one of the Christian women, Shirin, and her two sons met their death so touched the King's officer in charge of the proceedings that he too confessed faith in Christ and on 25 September was himself crucified. The next year saw the death of the famous martyr, Pethion, who had been a notable evangelist in Western Persia. He had many followers among the important families of the area, including a high-ranking military officer and the chief of police of Shahin. Eventually he was imprisoned and after being tortured for several days was beheaded and his head was exposed on the Royal Road near Kholwan. The persecution extended to Jews and Armenians and was so fierce that it has remained in the minds of Christians up to the present day. The little Christian community in Kirkuk still gathers together year by year to celebrate the faith and courage of their martyred forebearers."

C. ARE PERSIAN BELIEVERS PERSECUTED TODAY?

Unfortunately, the persecution is intense and severe. Some of the church leaders in Iran have been martyred because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Rev. Hossein Soodmand, an Assembly of God pastor in Meshed, Iran, was tortured, abused, and hung on December 3, 1990. Bishop Haik Hossepian-Mehr, the General Superintendent of the Assembly of God Church and first president of the Council of Protestant Churches in Iran, disappeared January 19, 1994 shortly after defending another believer named Mehdi Dibaj, and his body was found a few weeks later. The son of the Anglican Bishop Deghanni, was also killed. Tataous Mikaelian, the previous head of the Persian Bible Society till it was disbanded by the government, took over as the next president of the council of Protestant Churches and disappeared on June 29, 1994. His body was found a few days later.

If you are interested in more details, see the book, [History of the Christian Church](#), by Pakizegi or look at www.farsinet.com/dibaj. Or more information about Christian persecution around the world, including Iran contact:

Voice of the Martyrs, PO Box 443 Bartlesville, OK 74005 918-337-8015

www.perseccion.com

World Evangelical Defender PO box WEF Wheaton, IL 60189 630-668-0440

www.worldevangelical.org

D. THE TESTIMONY OF MEHDI DIBAJ

Mehdi Dibaj, an evangelist in Iran, was martyred in 1994, also. Our family knew Mehdi and his wife personally. They spent their first night of their honeymoon in our home. Later we were

invited to visit them in northern Iran to give them Bible lessons. Actually, Mehdi could have taught me because he had such a deep love for the Lord Jesus Christ and a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures.

How would you like to live in a solitary confinement in a 9 x 9 foot cell? In 1985 Mehdi was falsely accused and put in jail for over 8 years, three of which he lived in such solitary confinement in a 9x9 foot cell. Mehdi was charged with apostasy. His crime was leaving the Islamic religion to become a Christian. How are you living your Christian life? Is there enough evidence to charge you for being a Christian? During his formal court hearing on December 3, 1993, in Sari, Iran, Mehdi was his own lawyer. Here are a few excerpts from his Christ honoring defense:

“I have been charged with apostasy! The invisible God who knows our hearts has given assurance to us, as Christians, that we are not among the apostates who will perish but among the believers who will have eternal life. In Islamic Law (Shariat), an apostate is one who does not believe in God, the prophets or the resurrection of the dead, We Christians believe in all three!

They say ‘You were a Muslim and you have become a Christian.’ This is not so. For many years I had no religion. After searching and studying I accepted God's call and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to receive eternal life. People choose their religion but a Christian is chosen by Christ. He says, ‘You have not chosen me but I have chosen you...’

The love of Jesus has filled all my being and I feel the warmth of His love in every part of my body. God, who is my glory and honor and protector, has put his seal of approval upon me through His unsparing blessings and miracles.

This test of faith is a clear example. The good and kind God reproves and punishes all those whom He loves. He tests them in preparation for heaven. The God of Daniel, who protected his friends in the fiery furnace, has protected me for nine years in prison. And all the bad happenings have turned out for our good and gain, so much so that I am filled to overflowing with joy and thankfulness.”

Yes, Mehdi was found guilty of apostasy and was sentenced to death by the Islamic court. Yet, world wide public opinion intervened on his behalf causing his sentence to be delayed temporarily. He was threatened and released. However, 6 months later Mehdi disappeared and his body was discovered several days later. His picture and complete written testimony in English and Persian, as well as his spoken testimony which he gave after his temporary release from jail can be found at www.farsinet.com/dibaj.

E. MAKE A PERSONAL APPLICATION

Dear reader, “Are you willing to die for the Lord Jesus?” Perhaps a more important question is, “Are you willing to live for the Lord Jesus in the midst of a hostile and wicked world and publicly proclaim your love for Jesus Christ and serve him no matter what the cost?”

Some might ask, “Why would people ever believe in Christ, knowing they might be

excommunicated from their family, considered to be traitors by their government and hunted down by religious authorities who could harass, persecute, and even kill them?" I learned the answer from the following experience.

At a Persian Bible Conference near Toronto in 1996 I talked to an Iranian who had fled from Iran to go to Pakistan, came to believe Christ as the only way of salvation, and later migrated to Canada. This believer had suffered much for his faith and wanted to show me why. He pointed to a quote in a book by John Piper called Let the Nations be Glad. "You cannot show the preciousness of a person by being happy with his gifts. Ingratitude will certainly prove that the giver is not loved. But gratitude for the gifts does not prove that the giver is precious. What proves that the giver is precious is that glad-hearted readiness to leave all his gifts to be with him." To this Persian believer knowing the giver Jesus Christ personally as the Son of God and his Savior as well as being able to live in Christ's presence, was worth everything including persecution and the loss of friends, family means of living, and his country. Reader, "How much is Jesus Christ worth to you?"