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Understanding Suffering from the Perspective of Persecuted Christians

After being ransomed out of Communist prison in 1964, Pastor Richard Wurmbrand used his status as a notable public figure as a platform from which to proclaim the horrors of the Christian experience behind the Iron Curtain to those living in relative ease in the Western world. His words shocked the churches of the West out of their former ignorance and boldly called them to action on behalf of their suffering brothers and sisters around the globe. However, while the accounts he provided through his writings and speeches paint a gruesome picture of the brutal realities faced daily by Christians in restricted nations, they also tell of the unforeseen beauty he witnessed as he observed the sacrificial faith of his fellow prisoners and watched God use their persecution to spread the gospel in miraculous ways. His reflections allow for a more holistic view of Christian suffering than many in the West are often inclined to embrace. In times of intense persecution, he teaches, believers are opened up to the full range of human experience, plumbing the depths of despair and the agony of temptation, but at the same time ultimately overcome by unbounded joy as they preach the gospel with their lives and watch the body of Christ bloom even within the confines of prison walls.

During his years in the hands of the Communists, Wurmbrand and his fellow Christians fought a daily battle to maintain their faith, both against the external torturers who maimed their bodies and the internal powers of the devil which shook their resolve. Regardless of the firm grip with which the prisoners sought to hold on to belief in God, doubt constantly lurked on the

edges, threatening to take seed and drive them into despair. The physical tortures alone sufficed at times to push Christians into madness or apostasy. Some days the prisoners were beaten to the point of unconsciousness, only to be revived again and then beaten more.ⁱ Other days their bare, emaciated bodies faced knives and burning pokers.ⁱⁱ Beyond just inflicting physical pain, the Russian guards also went to every possible length to tailor their tortures to mock the Christian faith. One tactic they employed was to tie prisoners to crosses and force other inmates to defecate on their faces. At other times, they compelled Catholic priests to consecrate a Mass of feces and urine and serve it to the believers.ⁱⁱⁱ These forms of cruelty tore away at the prisoners' faith, causing them to cry out again and again in desperation to a God who had seemingly abandoned them. Some of them gave up belief altogether, while others like Wurmbrand spent hours in solitary confinement yelling at God in anger for his injustice towards his faithful followers.

The physical suffering that the prisoners endured in the torture chamber wore down their strength, leaving them vulnerable in their spiritual warfare against the temptations of the devil. In one of his speeches, Wurmbrand recounted an experience of sensing Satan's presence with him in his cell, remembering that, "He was very near. He laughed at me. He said, 'Where's Jesus? Why doesn't He save you, and the others who believed in him? He's a false Messiah!'"^{iv} This lurking suspicion that God did not exist was hard to disbelieve when all evidence seemed to prove its truth. Surely if God existed and was good, he would deliver his faithful followers from the hands of their tormentors. And yet, the prisoners found themselves trapped with no reason to hope for relief from their suffering. Such despair was only reinforced by frequent announcements that their families had abandoned them and that no one in the world outside remained faithful to

the gospel.^v Left in profound isolation and despair, the imprisoned Christians felt the full weight of believing themselves to be forsaken by all, even, at times, by God himself.

In spite of their despair, however, Wurmbrand and countless others refused to denounce God, distant though he seemed from their suffering. Like Job in the Old Testament, they questioned and even rebuked God,^{vi} and yet all the while they remained steadfast in their faith and even continued to risk greater torture in order to keep preaching the gospel. What gave them the drive to live out their faith in such a bold manner when the cost was so high and their trust in God was constantly attacked on all fronts? Their confidence stemmed from the delight they found in the message of the gospel and their assurance of God's sovereignty even when they could not understand his motives. Wurmbrand once said that, in his cell, he "often felt such an overwhelming joy that [he] thought [he'd] burst if it did not find expression."^{vii} And he did express it, through song, through prayer, and even through dance.^{viii} More importantly, however, he and his fellow prisoners let their joy become a source of love for one another and for their captors. Even while suffering the most severe forms of torture, they would cry out in prayers of forgiveness and intercession for the Communist guards.^{ix} These acts of bold witness and Christ-like love brought many of their oppressors to faith. The suffering Christians could be content in spite of their circumstances because they could see God actively using their sacrifices for his glory. So great, in fact, was their awareness of God's miraculous redemption of their pain that they actually took great delight in suffering for him and for the sake of his people.

In his autobiography, Wurmbrand writes, "I have found truly joyful Christians only in the Bible, in the Underground Church, and in prison."^x As opposed to many Christians living in prosperity in the West, the persecuted believers behind the Iron Curtain saw daily proof of the power of the gospel to free people from the confines of fear and despair, and even to rescue

evildoers from their twisted ways. Although battered from every side by voices mocking them for the stupidity of the gospel and their choice to be martyred for it, these prisoners instead found daily confirmation of their beliefs by looking around at the beautiful testimony of so many faithful Christians who were willing to lay down their lives for Christ and for the spread of his message of salvation. Even in times of crushing despair and anguish, the Christians of the persecuted church could not be robbed of the joy given them by the Holy Spirit, a joy which, unlike their mortal bodies, could not be subdued.

ⁱ James and Marti Hefley, *By their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the 20th Century*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 305.

ⁱⁱ Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Book Company, 1967), 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Foley, "The Case of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand: 14 Years of Communist Brainwashing," *Moody Monthly* (1968), 24.

^{iv} *Ibid*, 22.

^v *Ibid*.

^{vi} Wurmbrand, *Sermons in Solitary Confinement*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1969), 15.

^{vii} Foley, "The Case of Pastor Richard Wurmbrand," 23.

^{viii} Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ*, 57.

^{ix} *Ibid*, 55.

^x *Ibid*, 86.