

God's mission through suffering and martyrdom

A Korean perspective

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Abstract

Dr. Lee weaves together a theology of persecution with an historical study of persecution, both in the ancient church and in the modern Korean Church. He focuses on themes such as instrumental suffering, which is a description of the method God uses to reach and redeem the world. This instrumental suffering, the suffering that is utilized to accomplish the will and work of God, is seen in the ministry and mission of Jesus, the Apostle Paul, the Early Church, and in the experience of the Korean church. Instrumental suffering can be seen as a factor that contributed to the great growth of the contemporary Korean church in South Korea. Instrumental suffering is expected of all followers of Christ and should shape and inform our present ministry and mission.

Keywords Persecution studies, instrumental suffering, impassability of God, theology of persecution, martyrdom, suffering, Korea.

1. Introduction

There is growing interest and a consequent production of new materials in the area of persecution studies, evidenced by the increasing amount of articles, monographs, and university and seminary classes in this particular area of study. Paul (Young Kee) Lee caught the vision a decade ago. In 1999 his dissertation on "God's mission in suffering and martyrdom" was accepted by Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. Its publication in book form is in process. This essay will try to give a synopsis of his book.³

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³ The concluding chapter has been published under the same title in: C. Sauer & R. Howell (eds.): Suf-

1.1 Instrumental suffering

The work is both a biblical theology and an historical overview of the role of suffering and martyrdom in the accomplishment of God's mission to and for the world. A key idea and a key word in Lee's writing is the word "instrumental." By instrumental, Lee means that something (in this case suffering and martyrdom) is God's method in accomplishing his mission. It is the determining element, the pivotal action that brings about the desired result. Suffering and martyrdom are instrumental to God's plan and method of carrying out that plan. Indeed, it is not *a* method God uses; it is *the* method. It is inescapable and indispensable. If we are to be part of God's mission to the world, we will personally have to participate in this method. We become instruments in God's work and we will have to suffer, to some degree, to accomplish this work, in a manner worthy of God. It is built into the *modus operandi*. It is the *modus operandi*.

To a certain degree this sounds somewhat superficial – God had a plan to rescue mankind and he chose a procedure that would best accomplish that goal. It sounds so pragmatic and practical. It goes, however, much deeper than that. In fact, it is not impersonal, like a well functioning factory that has an automated mechanical process or procedure to produce a product. It is deeply personal, involving God himself. The Son of God becomes incarnated in order to personally experience suffering and death on behalf of mankind. It is integral to his mission and this mission reflects the very nature of God. It is redemptive suffering and it is quite personal and profound because it involves the person of Jesus Christ, who is both God and man. The followers of Christ do not participate in redemptive suffering in the same manner or degree that Christ did but, as a part of the redemptive process to rescue mankind and bring about reconciliation, they will have to suffer as well in completing God's mission. It will require sacrifice and self-denial, and can only be brought about by many trials and tribulations.

1.2 The suffering of the Korean church

What makes Lee's book unique and invaluable is the extensive section on the role of suffering, sacrifice, and martyrdom in the context of the trials and tribulations of the Korean church in that nation's struggle for freedom to be an independent, sovereign nation and how that factors into the subsequent growth of the church. Korean Christians suffered greatly both as patriots and as believers since the forces they faced were bent not only on destroying the church but the nation as well. In many ways the historical struggle continues in the North, where a large portion of Korean people suffer because of a political ideology that prides itself on being the most repressive persecutors of the church on the planet. What is ironic about this is that Pyongyang was once the center of Christianity in

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all of Asia and the faith flourished there in a manner unseen in any other area of Asia at the time. This was so despite its initial struggle with Christianity due to the early Korean culture's disdain of any interference from the outside. Once the Hermit Kingdom, as it is known to Koreans, was forced open, it embraced Christianity with unparalleled zeal. However, in just a few short decades, the church was suppressed, forced underground, and virtually decimated by another zealous force that occupies much of northern Asia. Instead of bringing peace and prosperity, it has brought only pain and poverty. The suffering of Korea and Koreans continues, representing a long history of repression and oppression. Lee intertwines the theme of the instrumentality of suffering and martyrdom with the one bright aspect that has emerged as a result of this suffering – the tremendous growth and zeal of Christianity in South Korea. Lee's conclusion is that this could not have happened as it has without the tremendous price many Korean Christians paid to serve God and to free their country.

1.3 Organization of the book

Like a good scholar, Lee lays out his argument in sections, building layer upon layer, climaxing with impassioned stories of courage from his native land. He then applies his observations and conclusions to the realms of missions and missiology, spiritual warfare, and the contemporary practices of ministry. It becomes, above all, a superb practical theology that is both pastoral and missiological, which, in reality, should never be divorced from each other.

2. Redemption through suffering

The first layer of his argument sets up the context which must be recognized to understand clearly God's redemption actions in history. Although we are familiar with the story of the Fall, Lee introduces it in order to present the important theme and truth of suffering as a means of countering, in fact destroying, the effects of the Fall. The abuse of genuine free will given to humanity by God and the deliberate choice to disobey led to God's judgment upon mankind, primarily but not entirely confined to a break in intimate relationship with the Creator. This was, of course, precipitated by Satan, who lured Adam and Eve away from God and set up doubt in their minds so that they rejected God's authority. Lee explains the prior existence of evil through a brief description of Satan and his origin and subsequent rebellion. The result of the Fall of mankind through Satan's deception is spiritual death, accompanied by physical death and decay in the cosmos. Things have gone awry and as long as sin and death prevails, they will continue in that state. But they will not always prevail.

The introduction of suffering and death into the picture becomes the very means by which God will profoundly respond and resolve this tragic situation. In essence, God takes upon himself the very punishment he has meted out and uses it to ulti-

mately defeat the source and cause of the rebellion, evil itself. Suffering becomes the means or instrument for defeating the cause of suffering.

2.1 The redemptive suffering of Christ

When one observes the ministry of Christ, it becomes clear that he saw salvation accomplished through suffering as the means of ultimate healing, a multi-dimensional healing of the social, spiritual, and physical realms. Through raising people from the dead and through his own resurrection from the dead, salvation and healing would go so far as to defeat death itself. In the meantime, even the righteous must suffer. Lee specifically seeks to dispel the idea that we must have a fatalistic attitude toward sickness as if it was something we must only endure. We should actively seek to alleviate suffering due to sickness. Like Christ, it is a way of defying the effects of evil in this world. Suffering, however, is something we are likely to encounter as we seek to do his will in a real world with real dangers and with a powerful enemy. To a certain degree, understood correctly, this suffering can have a redemptive quality. Christ's suffering was totally redemptive in every way. The suffering of the followers of Christ is redemptive only in the sense that it is a part of the process that will bring about the actual redemption of persons, as well as the cosmos. It was a pattern for Christ's life and ministry and it will be the pattern of ministry for his followers as well. It also defines the manner in which God's mission is to be carried out – not by the sword but by enduring unjust pain and humiliation.

2.2 The pain of God

Dr. Lee draws on many theologians, East and West, and introduces to us many names with which we would not be familiar. One name that is familiar is that of Kazoh Kitamori. There is a certain irony, if one viewed it from the world's perspective, in using him since he was a Japanese theologian and anyone remotely familiar with Korean history would know that Japanese Imperialism was the cause of much pain and suffering to Koreans, especially Korean Christians. However, in true Christian fashion, Lee expresses no personal animosity toward a Japanese brother. Kitamori's writings on the pain of God are enlightening to read if not controversial in light of the longstanding debate in the church over the passability or impassability of God. Lee writes:

Kitamori argues that our pain is actually healed when it serves the pain of God. This is what Jesus meant when he said to His disciples: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Mt. 16:25). Our wounds would be healed when they serve our Lord's wounds (1 Pet. 2:24). (Lee 1999:53)

Lee chides the Western Church somewhat when he quotes John Stott's (1986:322) statement that "the place of suffering in service" is seldom taught today. It is something that the persecuted church understands well and the Western church needs to

relearn. In all fairness, it is something the whole church, East and West, North and South, must never forget.

2.3 Suffering a part of the call of the Apostle Paul

Dr. Lee then addresses suffering in the ministry and missionary work of the Apostle Paul, which is especially relevant for missions and missiology. The vision that Saul experiences on the road to Damascus profoundly alters the course of his life and history as well. He is confronted by Jesus who specifically asks why Saul was persecuting him! As a Jewish scholar, Saul would not have put the concepts of Messiah and suffering together. Saul's experience with the Messiah who suffers is reinforced by the explanation of his missionary calling, which requires him to suffer to fulfill God's will for his life. His quick mind put it all together and he did not hesitate to acknowledge that Jesus was his Lord. There is never a hint in his writings that the prediction and reality of his sufferings ever deterred him from his mission. It went along with the territory. It was the chosen method by God to reach the world.

Lee mentions Simon Kistemaker's (n.d.:341) five reasons why Paul was the perfect choice to be a missionary. The question is not addressed as to why Paul would have to suffer as a missionary. He had no special qualification although some might argue that he had caused suffering so this was a part of his redemption. That may have been in Paul's mind. In reality the question is not asked nor is this particularly mentioned because he had no special qualification or even any special calling. In reality it is a part of the calling of anyone called to be a missionary. If suffering is a part of the plan for all servants of God, then Paul would be no exception. He was a servant of the risen Christ. He would suffer.

3. A theology of martyrdom in the Early Church

This truth is born out in the subsequent decades and centuries of church history. Persecution would be sporadic, sometimes intense, sometimes spotty, but always lurking and ready to spring forth somewhere in the life of the church. Dr. Lee gives a rather extensive picture of persecution of the Early Church and the development of the concept of martyrdom. The term martyr, which of course means witness, begins to accrue the added meaning of one who dies for witnessing. Stephen is called a martyr. Before long the term is used to refer almost exclusively to one who dies for the faith.

Lee takes the discussion one step further by introducing the idea of a theology of persecution in the writings of Clement and Tertullian. The question that is central to this discussion is the issue of volunteer martyrdom. There were those who were so zealous in their faith that they sought martyrdom, some to the point of provoking their enemies to kill them so they could attain the high honor of being killed for their faith. Lee writes:

Suffering and death at the hands of the persecutors were regarded so highly that there were many Christians by the second century who actually courted their own deaths in the name of the “martyrs.” This phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom cannot be said to have been a temporal sentiment of the day because it continued for more than a hundred years. This movement of voluntary martyrdom not only astonished the persecutors, but also the spread of voluntary martyrdom had become so alarming to many thoughtful church leaders that they gradually developed a sharp distinction between the courted martyrdom and the right kind of martyrdom that came as a result of persecution. (Lee 1999:229)

Tertullian seems to speak in favor of volunteer martyrdom while Clement speaks against it, since to him it appears to be suicide. Clement also talked about a phenomenon that occurred when people were facing martyrdom. He called it a “defense,” an *apologia*, a special ability given to martyrs by the Holy Spirit to bring people into the kingdom.

4. Persecution and church growth in Korea

A theme that was briefly introduced earlier in the book is re-introduced more fully at this point. Lee is concerned to discover what connection there might be between persecution and church growth. He feels that to a certain degree it is insensitive to talk about church growth in the context of the subject of persecution. Dr. Lee’s sense of propriety compels him to think that it seems to be cold calculation at a time when people need to have a deep reverence for the topic of dying for the faith. The question is raised by the misunderstood statement by Tertullian that the blood of Christians who die for the faith is the seed from which the church experiences greater growth. Lee notes that martyrdom does often strengthen the church, but that at times it has destroyed it in certain locations.

For those who wish to know and understand the phenomenal growth of the church in South Korea, Lee has given a robust explanation of the beginnings of Christianity in Korea. In what was obviously God’s providential timing, Protestant missionaries arrived on the shores of Korea precisely when Koreans were the most receptive. Lee delves into the historical factors that converged to bring about one of the most dramatic and unpredicted episodes in mission history. A country that consistently repelled any foreign influence eventually embraced Christianity in a way unparalleled in Asian church history. For Koreans, Christianity has never entirely been viewed as a Western religion. Equally as astounding is how the center of Christianity in Asia, the city of Pyongyang, went from being filled with Christians to being the place of great persecution, disappointment, and death as communism almost totally rooted out Christianity from that city.

The first wave of severe persecution was experienced much earlier by Catholic Christians who had denounced ancestor worship. By the time Protestant missionaries arrived, about a century after the Catholic missionaries, there was little central government support for Confucianism so persecution of those who denounced ancestor worship was far less strenuous.

The next threat to Christianity came from Japan's attempt to annex Korea, which it did occupy from 1910 to 1945. It was a time of severe suffering for Korean Christians particularly. It gave birth to the March First Movement – a patriotic movement initiated and sustained by Christians. They based their idea of national freedom on Christian faith. Lee recounts in detail this very significant era in Korean history. The issue during the Japanese occupation was Shinto Shrine worship, which was defined and promoted by the Japanese government as a patriotic duty but was seen by many Christians as idolatry. Many Christians died as a result of their refusal to participate in the so-called patriotic ceremonies. It caused a rift in the church in Korea because some Christian leaders taught that the worship was to be seen only as a patriotic ceremony and not as a religious act. However, many Christians made no such distinction and paid for it with the forfeiture of their life. Lee reflects on this era:

The Korean church found great encouragement in the sufferings of Christ and heartily welcomed the message of the gospel of salvation. From the Bible they knew how God had rescued the Israelite people from the bondage of slavery under the Egyptian empire. They loved Moses who led the Israelite people out of that bondage to freedom and independence in the land of promise. They nurtured their love and concern for their beloved nation with the word of God. They believed that the God of the Bible was on their side in their suffering and groaning under the Japanese control. (Lee 1999:312)

In some ways the division of the church at this time set a pattern for Christianity in Korea because church division has been a serious problem in the church since that time. This was truly one negative result of persecution.

Not long after the end of Japanese occupation, the Korean War broke out and Christians went through another horrific period of severe suffering. It lasted only three years but it was devastating, both to the country and to the church. The communists of North Korea and China, with their vast armies, sought to crush the church while forcing the population to submit to communist rule. The brutal atrocities of that era are well chronicled and documented, as is the heroic and courageous witness of Christians who died for no other reason than their allegiance to Christ. Most of the Christian churches were in the northern part of the country (now North Korea). At the end of recounting many stories of suffering and martyrdom in the context of the Korean War, Lee steps back and reflects on this suffering and martyr-

dom of Koreans from a missiological perspective. It was not only a time of shame and humiliation, but also a time of glory and honor because it truly contributed to the future growth and stability of the church in Korea. He writes:

The persecution of the Christian churches by the Russian Communists was a cruel and merciless one and the Korean War was tragic for Korea. We cannot explain such persecutions and tragedies. But what is significant from a missiological point of view is that God can use such historical events providentially for the advancement of the gospel. Despite suffering and martyrdom, the church in South Korea surprised the world by its rapid growth and missionary zeal. (Lee 1999:333)

5. Conclusion

The third and last part of Lee's book seeks to bring all the themes together.

5.1 Suffering as a part of mission theology

He presents the evidence why he thinks that the instrumentality of suffering and martyrdom needs to be a part of contemporary mission theology. "The pattern of suffering and death," he writes, "is to be reflected in the life and ministry of His disciples" (Lee 1999:341). When Jesus affirmed this to his immediate disciples, he was also affirming it for all subsequent followers. And it proved to be the case in the immediate years following the death of those who walked with Jesus. It has been a reality throughout the ages of the church and is a reality in many parts of the world today, in spite of the fact that many in Western countries might try to deny it. Lee utilizes the writings of Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, as well as others, to support his contention that persecution is not confined to the past, as much as we may wish this was true.

Lee advocates a theology of martyrdom to be a part of Christian theology and goes into some detail about the theological arguments that have denied the passability of God. Lee believes that it was the concepts of *apatheia* (not having emotion or passion) and *autarkeia* (being self-sufficient) attributed to God that have left Western theologians generally (with some notable exceptions) uninterested in the idea of suffering as being a part of God's mission to the world. His conclusion is that "all these theologians missed the missionary dimension of Christian martyrdom which is supposed to reflect the pattern of suffering and death of Jesus Christ in God's mission. Their focus on the suffering of God results in neglecting the aspect of Christian suffering and martyrdom, so that they have little understanding of this kind of instrumental suffering in fulfilling God's mission" (Lee 1999:349).

Lee (1999:349) asserts that "the phenomenon of persecution cannot be explained exhaustively as exclusively the work of Satan. As we have seen in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the breaking out of persecution can have divine as well as human factors. In fact, by faith we can even say sometimes God has a higher purpose in allowing

persecution among His people". To follow Jesus in self-denial and cross-bearing will mean suffering and martyrdom. This is the Principle of the Cross, Lee says. "However, not all Christians are called to suffer and die for the sake of Jesus' name in the literal sense, even though they are called to live by the principle of the cross in their life and witness in this world" (Lee 1999:359). Lee has an extended discussion of the meaning of the cross for His disciples in that he talks about the concept of "escapability." A person must choose to carry the cross of Christ; therefore, it is possible to escape this responsibility. However, to do so has negative consequences. On the other hand, when one hears the call of God and is moved by it, the response is to obey. "When the will of God in suffering and martyrdom is revealed and confirmed to the Christian martyrs through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, they are willing to obey God's calling to suffer and die for Christ's sake" (Lee 1999:377).

5.2 Suffering and spiritual warfare

Lee then discusses the very practical issue of spiritual warfare in the context of instrumental suffering in the process of fulfilling God's mission. Spiritual warfare was present in Christ's ministry and it is a part of ours as well, even when we are not fully aware of it. Warfare implies suffering, and suffering as a part of spiritual warfare is no exception. We recognize early on that we are weak before the powers that seek our demise and we must allow God to display his power through us to defeat the enemy. It is paradoxical but God's power is displayed through suffering. As we sacrifice and suffer for him, he is able to defeat our enemy. It is been proven true on many occasions, not the least through the suffering of the Korean church.

5.3 Instrumental suffering for ministry

Finally, instrumental suffering is essential for ministry. Lee is advocating a different understanding of ministry than what is generally understood today. His understanding of ministry includes all followers of Christ who comprise a *holy* priesthood who intercede for the lost as well as the found. Instrumental suffering must become the mode of Christian witness of the church before the world in order to be truly faithful to the mission and method of God's mission to the world.

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