

Leavening Church

Thought for Sunday 28th February (Steve Langton)

In our bible study group we have been looking at the epistle of [James chapter 1](#) and one of his themes is enduring trials. Here are a few of the verses:

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters,^[a] whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Now we are all used to the various trials and tribulations of life – the stresses of work and worries about elderly relatives or problematic children. And in this pandemic there are so many others pressures on us and so many more things to worry about.

I am sure the original recipients of the letter would have also suffered these everyday trials, but it is likely that James is referring to more serious persecution directly linked to their faith. Many members of the early Church suffered persecution at the hands of the authorities, both religious and secular, who were suspicious of the new religion. We know that there were many martyrs including Stephen who was stoned to death ([Acts 7](#)) and Paul who died in Rome. James the brother of Jesus, traditionally believed to be the author of the epistle, is thought to have been martyred, possibly by being thrown from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem.

Unfortunately persecution like this is not just a historical issue, with Christians suffering in many countries around the world today, as indeed do followers of other faiths. The countries involved vary over time; fifty years ago it was the Christians of Eastern Europe who suffered badly. The book 'God's Smuggler' told the story of Brother Andrew who smuggled bibles to the Christians in those countries – a book that had a big influence on many teenagers for whom Christianity could seem dry and boring! Happily most of that persecution ended with the fall of the communist regimes, but 'Open Doors', the organisation that Brother Andrew founded, continues to report on persecution around the world and publishes a list of the 50 worst countries each year.¹

Many of the countries on the list are predictable. There are the notorious totalitarian regimes such as North Korea, and there are countries where Christians are a small minority like Iran or Pakistan. There are also some surprises; in Mexico, whilst the population is predominantly Catholic, Christians who stand up against the illegal drugs trade are targeted for violence in areas of the country controlled by traffickers. Former gang members who become Christians are at particular risk.

Lord Jesus, thank You for the faith of our persecuted church family throughout the world. We pray for the Church in countries dominated by other faiths; help them to demonstrate your love and to resist calls for retaliation against those who threaten them. We remember Christians in Mexico, and their boldness in speaking out against criminal organisations. Please protect them and help them to keep advocating for justice. Amen.

¹ <https://opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list/> or Google 'open doors uk'