

**The Gates of Hell Have Not Prevailed:  
200 Years of Baptist Ministry in Myanmar  
Matthew 16:13-18  
October 6, 2013**

**Introduction – Persecution is the Common Experience of the Church**

The Church has always been persecuted. It began with Stephen in Acts 7 & 8. After that, persecution spearheaded by the man who would eventually become the Apostle Paul pushed the fledgling Church out of Jerusalem as far away as Damascus, Syria. By the end of the first century, the persecution was so severe that many in the Church identified themselves in the Great Tribulation described by the Apostle John in his recently written book, Revelation.



Indeed, the New Testament is full of warnings about persecution:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

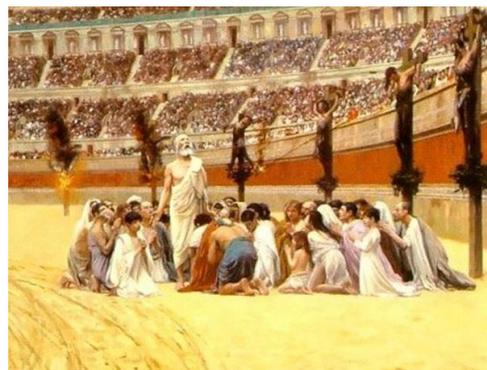
John 15:18-20

...and comfort for those enduring it:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

I Peter 4:12-14

The Roman Empire severely persecuted the Church for over three hundred years through crucifixion, beheading, and, perhaps most famously, at the mouths of lions for entertainment in the Coliseum. But even the legalization of Christianity in 314 AD did not stop persecution of true believers. Purchase a copy of *Foxes Book of Martyrs* and you will be inspired by those who endured unspeakable torture and death for the sake of Christ. Even today, persecution is on the rise against Christians around the



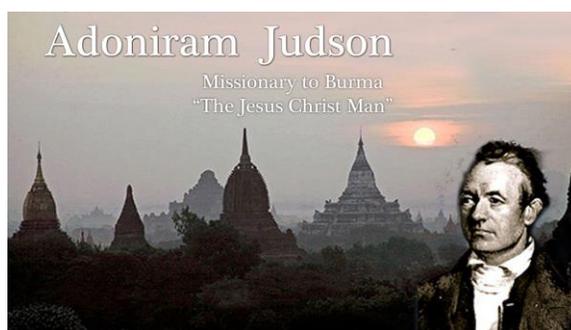
world. But the Church continues to prevail and in some places, even thrive in places where there is persecution. This should not surprise us. Christ has promised a prevailing Church:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:13-18

### **The Beginnings of Christian Ministry in Burma through Judson**

Adoniram Judson is one of the giants of the faith. His story is inspirational. He possessed a rare brilliant intellect and ambition to match it. Dramatically converted from atheism to a living and vital Christian faith, he determined to spend his life in service to God as a missionary to a foreign land. In 1813, he went to visit and work with William Carey in India. But he was forced to leave and landed on the squalid shores of Burma. There he and his wife, Ann, suffered unspeakable miseries of imprisonment, torture and starvation. But, but through the love of Christ, they prevailed and with his gifted intellect, was able to translate the Bible into the Burmese language.



Hear this extended narrative from *Giants of the Missionary Trial* by Eugene Myers Harrison

[Six years later], “in the year 1828 an event of vast significance took place. Having come in contact with the Karens, a race of wild people living in remote and almost inaccessible jungles, Judson longed for the opportunity of winning a Karen for Christ and thus reaching his race. This opportunity came to him through Ko Tha Byu, a Karen slave who was sold one day in the bazaar in Moulmein and bought by a native Christian, who forthwith brought him to Judson to be taught and, if possible, evangelized. Ko Tha Byu was a desperate robber bandit. He had taken part in approximately thirty murders and was a hardened criminal with a vicious nature and an ungovernable temper. Patiently, prayerfully, and lovingly, Judson instructed [him] who

eventually not only yielded to the transforming power of Christ but went through the jungles as a flaming evangelist among his people. The hearts of the Karens were remarkably and providentially prepared for the reception of the gospel message by a tradition prevalent among them to this effect:

Long, long ago the Karen elder brother and his young white brother lived close together. God gave each of them a Book of Gold containing all they needed for their salvation, success and happiness. The Karen brother neglected and lost his Book of Gold and so he fell into a wretched type of existence, ignorant and cruelly oppressed by the Burmese. The white brother, however, prized his Golden Book, or Book of God, and so, when he sailed away across the oceans, God greatly blessed him. Someday the white brother will return, bringing with him God's Book, which, if the Karen people will receive and obey, will bring to them salvation and untold blessings.

Accordingly, as Ko Tha Byu went on his unwearying preaching tours through the jungles, declaring that the long-looked-for white brother had returned with God's Book, hundreds received the message with gladness.

When a depraved slave, a bandit and murderer, was brought to Judson in 1828, who would have imagined that, a century later, the Christian Karens alone would have many splendid high schools, hundreds of village schools, some 800 self-supporting churches and a Christian constituency of more than 150,000?<sup>1</sup>”

### **Persecution of the Church in Burma**

In modern times, Burma has been a troubled land. Historically, it had been a land of traditional kingships and local tribal governments. Britain's 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial conquests centralized power and stripped the traditional rulers of their authority. Burma finally achieved independence in 1948 and for a while survived as a democracy until 1962 when a military coup toppled the government. The military rulers have proven to be cruel and oppressive, even to this day. With a Socialist agenda, they have sought to bring the diverse tribes and religions all into one homogenized nation with one religion and language. Their tactics have included torture, mass murder, rape, and every kind of abuse imaginable.



With increasing world awareness and sanctions against the government, the situation in Burma – which is now called Myanmar, is slowly changing. Still, in January, 2007, a government memo was leaked to the British newspaper, *The Telegraph*, that opens with the line, “There shall be no home where the Christian religion is practiced.” *The Telegraph* reported that in 2006, an

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/giants/biojudson2.html> Accessed October 3, 2013.

estimated 27,000 members of the predominantly Christian Karen tribe were driven from their homes in eastern Burma. In 2010, the government's primary dissenter, Nobel Peace Prize winner, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from prison. That action has lessened some persecution, but reports from even a few months ago indicate that persecution of religious groups in some places is still very severe.



And yet the church in Myanmar continues to thrive, even in the midst of persecution. As a focus of this year's World Mission Offering, the American Baptists are increasing their support for Baptist missions in Myanmar, as you have seen. We are grateful for God's continued work in the land where the Judson's labored two hundred years ago.

### **Reflection**

What shall we say to these things? The Gospel has come full-circle to us. In our moment of greatest need, God sent Karen refugees to us to encourage us. Though we are challenged by the barrier of language, we are joined by the love of Christ. Satan and the Gates of Hell have sought to destroy the Church in Myanmar. The effect has been the opposite. The Church has prevailed. The Church will always prevail because it is Christ's work, not ours. And Christ has already defeated Satan and the Gates of Hell when he took their worst at the cross and defeated them through the Resurrection.



This morning, we come in fellowship with our Karen brothers and sisters to the Lord's Table. There is nothing more fitting because it is here, at the Lord's Table, that we celebrate the victory of Christ through his death and resurrection. And as we remember him, we are participants in the very death and resurrection that has defeated all the powers of Hell.

The Word has been spoken and received.

The Table is set.

Come. Let's celebrate the victory of Christ together!