



Scenes from the Assyrian Chaldean Christian community in Iraq (Photo credit: Iraqi Christian Council, Juliana Taimoorazy)

The Fellowship of (His) Sufferings

Those who previously were uninformed about – or closing their eyes to – the severity of what Christians around the world face have found it hard to avoid reality in recent years. Groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, al Shabaab, the Fulani jihadists, the Taliban, and others make denial more difficult. Some groups even post videos of their evil deeds on social media.

Who will ever forget the graphic images of martyred men in orange jumpsuits on a Libyan seashore? Multiply those martyrs by millions. Spread them throughout the world – in punishment and prison camps in China and North Korea, scorched-earth towns in Sudan, bomb-blasted churches in Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan, and corpse-piled roads in Nigerian villages. Do this and you have the Fellowship of Sufferings.

We are **all** members of one Body. St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12: 26, “If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts share its suffering.” In Philippians 3, he says he wants to know Christ, not only in “the power of His resurrection,” but also “the fellowship of His sufferings.” We may never know the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings by facing an executioner’s sword, as Paul did. But we Christians worshipping in freedom should share in sufferings of those in Christ’s Body today who *do* face an executioner’s sword, a persecutor’s helicopter gunship, or a jihadist’s RPG.

The beautiful [song](#) by Matt and Beth Redman speaks of blessing the name of the Lord in all circumstances – in plentiful lands, in streams of abundance, in desert places, in the wilderness. . . and then declares:

*Every blessing You pour out, I’ll turn back to praise.
When the darkness closes in, Lord, still I will say,
“Blessed be the Name of the Lord.”*

I'm uncomfortable with how much we *love* that first line. Sometimes when churches use this song in worship they just repeat that line about 10 times, eyes closed, hands uplifted. "Yes, Lord! Every blessing You pour out, I'll turn back to praise!" Follow that by a perfunctory rush through the unpleasant bit about darkness closing in, and then, whew, back to praise!

The Fellowship of Sufferings is more familiar with the second line. They've seen darkness close in, in ISIS' rolling tanks and trucks, in swarming BJP mobs in India, on galloping horses of Janjaweed in Sudan, in the terror of burning to death in a brick kiln in Pakistan. But they are the [testimony of faithfulness](#) that still says, "Blessed be the Name of the Lord."

The Redman hymn continues the theme. "Blessed be Your name on the road marked with suffering, though there's pain in the offering." Of course we in the West experience suffering, pain, and loss. No one should diminish that. But few of us have fled from our homes, and then, still traumatized, fled from where we thought we found refuge. That is what thousands of Iraqi brothers and sisters have experienced on "the road marked with suffering" from [Mosul](#) to [Qaraqosh to Erbil](#). It is what they and countless [Syrian Christians](#) still [experience today](#).

Last month was another tragedy [for Iraqi Christians](#). Father Adday Ramzi Bet-Israel Diril, based in Istanbul, is known and loved for taking care of 7,000 Iraqi Christian refugees displaced in Turkey. In January his elderly parents, Hurmuz and Shmoni Diril, [disappeared](#) from their home, possibly by PKK (Kurdish militia) members. On March 20, Shmoni's [body was found](#), brutally murdered. Hurmuz is still missing. Juliana Taimoorazy, founder and president of the [Iraqi Christian Relief Council](#) wrote of the funeral: "Martyr Shmoni who became mother to us all was laid to rest in Istanbul. Her son, Father Adday Ramzi committed her body to the earth. Unimaginable pain reigns over this funeral. This is for Shmoni: We will tell the story of your bravery, your self-sacrificial love for your family and for your land, and we promise that your name will be reverberated upon countless of lips for generations to come."

Another [worship song](#) has the same message from the members of the Fellowship of Sufferings – interestingly, also Matt Redman's. We in freedom sing glibly: *I will offer up my life in spirit and truth, pouring out the oil of love as my worship to You. In surrender I must give my every part; Lord, receive the sacrifice of a broken heart.* Reality came home to me singing this at my parish, Church of the Apostles, sitting next to a tall, slender elder statesman from what was still then southern Sudan, the Honorable Abel Alier. Alier is an attorney, judge, human rights activist, and politician who sits on the Permanent Court of International Arbitration in The Hague. He is also a Christian, and as he heard this song, his eyes filled with tears. He asked me to write the words for him. Christians in Sudan and South Sudan understand what it means to literally offer up your life. I suddenly understood the song's reference to [Paul](#) just before martyrdom: *For I am already being poured out as a drink offering.*

This devotional is not meant to inflict guilt. Well, maybe a little. . . I am Irish, after all. But it is meant to remind you when you sing hymns on Sunday – be they modern or traditional ones

like “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” don’t focus on your enjoyment of the praise so much that you neglect the Fellowship of Sufferings. Don’t be afraid to allow the image of martyred Christians on a Libyan beach to come to your mind as you sing, “the body they may kill.” Let it remind you to pray for the worldwide Body of Christ, the faithful who have died for Jesus. His Kingdom is forever.

Scripture: . . . *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.* Philippians 3: 10-11

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering 2Timothy 4: 6

Suggested Action: Listen to the songs in the hyperlinks and determine to be more thoughtful and reflective of lyrics in worship songs that reveal the character of the Suffering Church.

Prayer: *Father God, we thank You that You give us the grace to desire to know You and power of Your resurrection and to share in the Fellowship of sufferings. Now we ask that You give us influence and authority to stand in the gap for Your children who suffer for their love for You. We will stand in the gap for the Fellowship of Sufferings. In Jesus’ Name. Amen*