

[Working Paper] Singing Dangerously: How Christians Endure Persecution Through Song



FRANK FORTUNATO

Frank Fortunato has served in music ministry his entire lifetime. He taught college music courses, followed by music ministry with Operation Mobilization's mission ships. As a music missionary, Frank has been involved in teaching on biblical worship in various nations, and founded Heart Sounds International. As a worship musician, Frank has led worship at various global events and has served as a worship leader in three Atlanta-area churches. Frank teaches improvisational piano, and also teaches two week-long graduate courses in worship in at the Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies.

Frank completed undergraduate studies in piano, a master's in ethnomusicology, and a doctorate in worship studies at the Webber Institute, where he now directs the Institute's GROW (Global Renewal of Worship). Frank co-authored *All the World Is Singing: Glorifying God Through the Worship Music of the Nations*, and co-edited *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. The Fortunatos are based at the OM USA headquarters in Tyrone, Georgia, and reside in Peachtree City, Georgia.

Singing Dangerously: How Christians Endure Persecution Through Song¹

Before he became king, David, the warrior-musician, had lived in a most dangerous situation. He was constantly on the run from a jealous, unpredictable King Saul and had to escape his wrath by moving from one location to another. To maintain his equilibrium in such a volatile state, David kept two sets of weapons in his arsenal: not only a sword for battle but also a musical instrument to accompany his singing of praise and lament now found in the psalms he composed. Written while David hid deep in a cave, Psalm 57 portrays lyrics of anguish: "I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts" (verse 4). But he soon peered beyond the confines of the cave in which he found shelter and protection, and continued to sing a song of praise: "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth" (verse 5). He learned how to face a dangerous situation: he sang!

¹ This article is an adaptation of a presentation given at the conference Christian Congregational Music: Local and Global Perspectives, Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxford, UK, August 2015.



“Singing dangerously” is a title that plays with words. It could imply “singing through dangerous times,” or “doing something dangerous and singing during trials.” What follows in this paper will consider both aspects as bookends to the following theme: biblical, vibrant worship that is culturally relevant will sustain God’s people through times of trial.

Biblical and theological reflections

From Genesis to Revelation, the scriptures reveal a motif of persecution. The Psalms present more lament than praise. Paul and Silas sang in prison as chains likely cut into their hands and ankles. The book of Revelation resonates with the praises and cries of the martyred saints.

Psalm 22 reminds us that the cry of the greatest martyr meant enduring the cross. Various commentators, aware that the Psalms were deep within Jesus’s memory, imagine that he may have endured the agony of the cross while chanting verses from Psalm 22. In *Sorrow and Blood*, a seminal book about the persecution of Christians, the authors state that “The cross of Christ will always stand as a powerful reminder, that God was prepared to suffer, in order to redeem the world, and that He expects His people to share the same commitment, as they participate in the task of restoring the world to its former glory” (Taylor, Meer, and Reimer 1999, 73). The death of Jesus Christ on the cross brings us face to face with the unfathomable wonder of God’s sacrificial love, strengthening us to deal with our own suffering with courage and determination. As we direct our gaze to the cross, we find astonishing power and courage to face the fear and terror of suffering. Courage has often been sustained through songs that do not gloss over our pain, but instead penetrate our terrified emotions with words of hope.

Historical reflections

Historical snapshots of ways that song sustained God’s people through trial are abundant:

- Martin Luther, for example, comes to mind as believers this year reflect on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Luther was arrested, tried, excommunicated, hunted, hidden, and betrayed. His greatest foe was not the Church, but the devil. He fought back with song, including Psalm 46, *Ein feste Burg*. His hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” became a rallying song for the Protestant church.
- Another example: from John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* comes the story of Julius Palmer. When Palmer witnessed the faith of Protestant martyrs, he became an ardent anti-Catholic and published various documents in support of his view. He was arrested and condemned to death. On the morning of July

16, 1556, as flames engulfed Palmer and his fellow friends of resistance, a song from Psalm 31 was on their lips: “Be strong and take courage.” Their final words encapsulated their hope, fortified by song, as they stated: “Lord Jesus, receive our souls.”²

- The Huguenots, a 16th-century French Protestant movement, encountered much persecution from the established Roman Catholic church. They kept their hope alive by singing the Psalms. They kept Psalm 3 in mind, for example, when faced with impending danger in war. When Louis XIV forbade the singing of the Psalms, the Huguenots sought refuge in the forests and continued their singing (Petersen and Petersen 1999, "January 4").
- In 1839, a coal mine collapsed in Scotland. Thirteen miners were trapped. They sang the metrical version of Psalm 20, from memory, as they faced certain death. This psalm says, “In time of trouble, may the Lord respond to your cry.” All thirteen miners were rescued, singing Psalm 20 right up to the moment of the last miner’s rescue (Petersen and Petersen 1999, "February 7").

Current reflections

Present-day snapshots of God’s people continue to reveal the motif of enduring trials through worship:

- Xiao Min, one of the most famous Chinese songwriters of the last few decades, composed more than 1,200 songs, collectively known as the Canaan hymns. In one of her hymns, written from prison, she evokes an image of the pine tree, which in scorching heat and bitter cold refuses to bend or yield (Taylor, Meer, and Reimer 1999, 280). Many of her hymns draw on nature imagery. This hymn exhorts Christians to endure and remain loyal through adversity. The English paraphrase of that song proclaims:

In the midst of severe times I train myself to endure.
Behold the tall pine trees on the mountain,
Receiving winds from all directions,
Persevering in the scorching heat and bitter cold,
Through spring, summer, fall, winter.

² <http://www.biblestudytools.com/history/foxs-book-of-martyrs/rev-julius-palmer.html>

- During Ethiopia's Communist years in the 1980s, many of its churches went underground for survival. Terfaye Gabbiso, a popular Ethiopian musician, was incarcerated for seven years because of his songs of faith. His songs played in both Christian and Muslim music shops, public markets, and homes. One of his songs builds on Daniel's story of the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace (Taylor, Meer, and Reimer 1999, 350). The paraphrased lyrics are:

I will not deny my Jesus, and worship an object. I refuse. I refrain.

I will not worship the image/nor kneel down before a man-made thing,

From the burning anger of a Nebuchadnezzar.

My Lord, whom I serve, will surely deliver me.

- Miriam Adeney's book *Kingdom Without Borders* presents a riveting story from Rwanda (234). During the killing spree in the early 1990s, over 300,000 women were raped. Within 100 days, 800,000 people were killed. One person described an event at a Catholic orphanage. Killers arrived and shouted, "Point out the Tutsi children." The nuns refused and boldly responded: "We only have children of God here." Furious, the killers herded the entire orphanage near a mass grave. The nuns began to sing a hymn of praise, and the children also joined in. Unfazed and unmoved, the killers continued with their murderous rampage: one by one, each person was murdered. The nuns were the first to be slaughtered. The children, however, kept on singing until there was just one treble voice left humbly singing the song of devotion. There was no screaming, no panic. Even children were able to face their suffering and martyrdom through song.
- A most remarkable story of endurance involves Dmitri, a believer who was imprisoned for his faith. Dmitri was the only believer among 1,500 hardened criminals in a large prison. His tormentors were unable to break him. Dmitri pointed to two sources of strength in the face of torture. Every morning at daybreak during seventeen years in prison, Dmitri would stand at attention by his bed. Facing the east, raising his arms in praise to God, he would sing a song in his dialect and in his cultural style to Jesus. The reaction of the other prisoners was predictable. Dmitri recounted their mocking laughter, cursing, and jeers. The other prisoners banged metal cups against the iron bars in angry protest. They threw food and, sometimes, human waste to try to silence him and extinguish the only true light shining in that dark place every morning at dawn.

Another discipline and custom that sustained Dmitri—as told to Nick Ripken, author of the book *The Insanity of God* (155–62)—was his practice of devotion through writing down words and songs that he

could remember. Whenever he found a scrap of paper in the prison, he would sneak it back to his cell and write down lyrics that he remembered.

There he would pull out a stub of a pencil or a tiny piece of charcoal he had saved, and he would write on that scrap of paper: Bible verses, scripture stories, or songs. Whenever one of his jailors spotted the pieces of paper, he would beat Dmitri severely.

The day arrived when Dmitri left his cell to face execution. As he was dragged down the corridor, the strangest thing happened. Before he and his guard reached the door leading to the courtyard and his place of execution, 1,500 hardened criminals stood at attention by their beds. They faced the east and they began to sing. Dmitri told Ripken that it sounded to him like the greatest choir in all of history. Those criminals raised their arms and began to sing the very song they had heard Dmitri sing to Jesus every morning all of those years.

Dmitri's jailors instantly released their hold on his arms and stepped away from him in terror. One of them demanded, "Who are you?" Dmitri stood tall and responded, "I am a son of the Living God, and Jesus is his name." The guards returned him to his cell. Soon after, he was released to his family.

Documenting dangerous singing

One of the ministries documenting the singing of the persecuted church is Heart Sounds International (HSI).³ HSI is a division of the mission agency Operation Mobilization (OM). OM has 3,200 workers serving in 118 nations.

HSI is a volunteer fellowship that encourages musicians from emerging local churches in restricted parts of the world to compose scripture-based worship songs using indigenous melodies and rhythms. The songs are then recorded by professional recording engineers using multi-track digital equipment. More than 70 projects in 35 nations have been completed. All the projects are non-English, non-Western, or cultural fusions. Distribution of the recordings became a unifying force for Christians isolated from each other. Often, these recordings have involved the very first Christians in a region, standing before a microphone and recording a community's or region's first Christian songs. The motto of HSI states that "Heart Sounds International exists to help ignite

³ www.heart-sounds.org

culturally relevant and biblically appropriate worship, especially in places where Christ-followers are restricted, persecuted or unknown.”

Here are some brief snapshots from the HSI teams:

- *The Sudan:* On the outskirts of Khartoum, just prior to the establishment of Southern Sudan, a group of Dinka refugees had fled the fighting in the South. At the time, the U.S. State Department labeled the Dinka people the world’s most persecuted tribe. An HSI team captured the singing of the Dinka in a boiling-hot, 110-degree studio. At one point during the recording, the group started spontaneously dancing in the makeshift studio, and the engineer rushed into the room to keep the expensive microphones from toppling with the jubilant dancing. During an interview following the recording, one of the pastors shared that the songs spoke of their hope as they faced turmoil and travail while in the war zone in the South.
- *Tunisia:* In Tunisia, HSI had the privilege of making the first recordings of modern Arabic worship songs. Previously, worship songs were imported from Egypt or Morocco. The recording team arrived at a time when there were very few believers in the nation, and those few faced many restrictions. Because it was prohibitive to go to a commercial studio, the HSI team brought in four suitcases of equipment, leaving behind a very decent digital studio for ongoing projects. Later research revealed that the recordings found their way not only into the house churches across Tunisia, but also to other parts of North Africa and southern Europe, and were broadcast on the SAT-7 cable network.
- *Arabian Peninsula:* In an Arab Peninsula country, an HSI team recorded the first songs of the new believers, who lived not far from the Al-Qaeda headquarters. The team included a missionary from the UK who was fluent in various Bedouin dialects and Arabic. During rehearsal, he realized that the engineer was about to record an Arabic song that was theologically obscure. The British linguist worked hours to rewrite the song, keeping intact the rhythm, poetry, and rhyme schemes of the Arabic language. He stated simply, “We have to get this right. This is the initial recording of these new believers. It will shape their theology.”
- *Mongolia:* People in Mongolia had lived under the iron bars of the Soviet system. The government forced the use of the Russian language across the entire Union. No churches were allowed to function. Soon after the Union collapsed, HSI went to Mongolia to help the young church develop Mongolian worship songs. Over three years, the HSI teams facilitated songwriting workshops, new song concerts,

and recordings of the new songs. One pastor skillfully developed songs that reflected the practice of composers at sports events, praising the winning attributes of the athletes. Musicians adapted local melodies and used lyrics that spoke of Jesus the champion and similar themes.

The future: Praying about entering North Korea

HSI workers today pray for the day when they can record the songs of suffering believers in North Korea. The China Harvest mission shares the story of “singing dangerously” every Christmas in North Korea:⁴

When darkness falls, the believers quietly slip into the night and walk to a nearby mountain. When they reach the top of the mountain, they look to the South, and picture in their minds their Christian brothers and sisters in South Korea openly walking to church or relaxing at home singing "Silent Night." But then, rather than singing "Silent Night" along with them, they instead sing aloud:

Faith of our fathers! Living still, In spite of dungeon, fire, and sword;
O how our hearts beat high with joy,
whene'er we hear that glorious word!
Faith of our fathers, holy faith!
We will be true to thee till death. (Words: Frederick William Faber)

There is a clue in that song by Faber that has kept the North Koreans, and all God's people singing. "O how our hearts beat high with joy." How could hearts beat joyfully in dire circumstances? That brings us back to David, and Psalm 57, composed in that dark, dank, dreary cave. Surrounded by troubles lurking outside that cave, David takes hold not only of his instrument but also of his emotions. Translations and paraphrases dip into an amazing Hebrew word, *koon*. David's song repeats the word twice in one verse. He could not be more clear; he could not be more confident; he could not be more determined. "My heart is *koon* (fixed). . . . My heart is *koon* (fixed)!" (Other versions use "confident," "steady," "ready"). David does not end there. Steadying his emotional state in his turbulent circumstances, he adds another double statement: "I will sing, yes, I will sing" (57:7 NASB). May we all join the band of Luthers, Palmers, Dmitris, Rwandan nuns and children, and make it clear to the watching world: "Come what may, we will sing!"

⁴ "A Pyongyang Christmas: They are Singing to You, at the Risk of their Lives," (This story was reported by China Harvest, in 2004, at www.nkfreedom.org. The story is no longer available at the website).

References

- Adeney, Miriam. 2009. *Kingdom Without Borders: The Untold Story of Global Christianity*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books.
- Petersen, William, and Randy Petersen. 1999. *The One Year Book of Psalms: 365 Inspirational Readings from One of the Best-Loved Books of the Bible*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers.
- Ripken, Nik, and Gregg Lewis. 2013. *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected*. Later Printing edition. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Books.
- Taylor, William D., Antonia van der Meer, and Reg Reimer. 1999. *Sorrow and Blood: Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom*. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library.