

Persecuted for Christ

A Defining Moment in the Life of F.F. Bosworth

Roscoe Barnes III, M.A.R., B.S., is a well known author, copywriter, journalist and ghostwriter.



“Every work of God, as every individual, has to have its period of testing,” said C.T. Studd, the great missionary pioneer. “For only by this means can the dross be purged away, weaknesses and unbelief exposed and eradicated, and the instrument be fitted for effective use.”¹ These words by C.T. Studd provide a summary of the spiritual truths that F.F. Bosworth would discover during his early work in Texas.

Fred Francis Bosworth (1877-1958) was a Pentecostal pioneer, famous healing evangelist, musician and author who reportedly led more than a million people to Christ through his ministry. Born on a farm near Utica, Neb., he was considered, by scholars and ministers alike, to be one of the most successful healing evangelists of the 20th century. He received more than 225,000 written testimonies of healing and his book, *Christ the Healer*, is a classic that has been in print since 1924. Though he spent most of his life as a member of the Christian & Missionary Alliance, he was well respected among Pentecostals and holiness groups.

Back in 1911 while engaging in church planting in Dallas, Texas, Bosworth found he would learn a few things in ways that he never imagined. He would learn what it really means to suffer for Christ, to be persecuted in His name and to be willing to lay down his life. Like Job, he would encounter pain, danger, and even loneliness. At the same time he would discover what it means to be tried by fire. All of this happened on a Saturday night in August 1911 after he reached out to people of another race.

It began with an invitation to share the “full gospel” with a crowd of white people in Hearne, Texas, where a black Pentecostal campmeeting was being held in a tent. The Spirit was moving and great things were happening in the black service. So much so, that the meeting caught the attention of the white community. As a result, crowds of white people began to gather around the tent. They watched in amazement as the blacks conducted service and worshipped God in this new way.

¹ Norman Grubb, *C.T. Studd: Cricketer & Pioneer* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1978), 212.

They were moved by the preaching and the testimonies that were shared about God's Spirit.

Despite their intense level of interest, however, the whites would not enter the tent. The reason was likely due to the charged racial climate in the South and the long-established rules about mixing with other races at that time.

Therefore, to accommodate this curious crowd, the blacks erected a brush arbor near the tent. That way, the whites could learn about the Pentecostal experience at a distance without actually sitting with the blacks. But the crowd continued to grow and spilled out around both the tent and the brush arbor.

"Many of the white citizens became deeply interested in the teaching," wrote Bosworth. "And not wanting to seek the baptism at a colored altar, the white people urged the colored leaders to send for some white Pentecostal teacher to come and help them into the baptism."²

Since Bosworth, now 34, was a white preacher and had experienced what the blacks were preaching about, he was the perfect candidate for the mission. He received the invitation to address the crowd on Saturday night, August 5.³ Though his initial understanding was that he would speak to the whites -- and not necessarily the blacks -- it was no doubt clear that the two groups of people were together in one place. There were risks, to be sure, but Bosworth had spent a lifetime taking risks.

Furthermore, he was not unfamiliar with black worship or with associating with black leaders. In June 1907, he had the privilege of meeting with the black Pentecostal pioneer, William J. Seymour of Azusa Street. In fact, he had a picture

² F.F. Bosworth to his mother and family, 21 August 1911, typewritten letter, 1, Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center, Springfield, MO.

³ Bosworth was not always precise or exact in his use of dates. Sometimes, when sharing his testimony, he omitted dates all together. In a letter to his brother, Burton (September 1912), he says the beating occurred "last September." But in another letter (August 2, 1911), he says the incident occurred on a Saturday night of August 1911. Interestingly enough, a poem by Fred Graves entitled, "In Commemoration of Aug. 6, 1911," suggests the persecution occurred on a Sunday. Since Bosworth specifically stated "Saturday" in his letter of Aug. 21, 1911, the date for the incident was most likely Saturday, Aug. 5, 1911.

taken with Seymour and other Pentecostal pioneers.⁴ So being with people of another race was not an issue with him.

However, the seriousness of the invitation becomes amplified when one considers that the early 20th century was a turbulent time for the United States in general, and Texas in particular. Race relations were anything but cordial. "Lynchings were all too common in the early 20th century," according to a report by Ohio State University. "And they had a history much deeper and darker than any numbers can convey."⁵ Between 1882 and 1962, more than 4,000 lynchings occurred in the United States. More than 3,000 of the victims -- about 72.2 percent -- were black. With a total of 493 lynchings, Texas was listed as third among states with the highest number. Mississippi was first with 581 and Georgia was second, with 531.⁶

At the time of Bosworth's ministry, Texas had had a number of lynchings. Victims included: Anderson Ellis, Rockwall, March 7, 1909; Matthew Chase and "Mose" Creole, Marshall, April 30, 1909; Holland Brooks, Dallas, March 3, 1910; Leonard Johnson, Rusk, June 26, 1910; Five members of the Cassaway family, San Antonio, April 1911.⁷

Within this context, it becomes clear that reaching out to people of a different race in Texas was no small matter. Still, Bosworth wanted to do what was right. He wanted to do what he was called to do. Since he was not one to back down from an opportunity to share what he considered "the full gospel," he agreed to go to Hearne to see what was happening and to be a blessing, if he could.

⁴ Gordon P. Gardiner, *Out of Zion Into All the World* (Shippensburg, PA: Companion Press, 1990), 40, 41.

⁵ "Lynching," Ohio State, [article on-line]; available from <http://1912.history.ohio-state.edu/race/race1.htm>

⁶ "Lynching Statistics," Classroom: The Charles Chestnut Digital bArchive [article on-line]; available from <http://www.berea.edu/faculty/browners/chesnutt/classroom/lynchingstat.html>.

⁷ The Lynching Century: Names of African Americans Who Died in Racial Violence in the United States, 1865-1965 [document on-line]; available from <http://www.geocities.com/Colosseum/Base/8507/NLNames1.htm>.

Hearne was a small town located in Robertson County, about 100 miles south of Bosworth's home in Dallas. Known as the "crossroads of Texas," it was situated in the middle of the state in a triangle formed by Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth and San Antonio. It had two major highways and two rail lines.⁸ The quaint rural town was established in 1868 and soon became known for its cotton and rail center. By 1910, it had a population of 2,353.⁹

On his visit to Hearne, Bosworth wanted to first learn about the needs and questions he was invited to address. He didn't intend to preach on the first visit. Yet, he was open to whatever God had in store. When he arrived at the campgrounds, he saw huge crowds under the tent and spilling out of the brush arbor. There were cars and carriages and people standing all around the area. Not sure of his location, he stopped and asked where his meeting was being held. He quickly learned he was at the right place. When people within the white audience recognized him, they urged him to preach. So he positioned himself on a platform between the two crowds with the blacks on one side and the whites on the other. In his usual manner, he opened his bible and began to teach the Word calmly, but with conviction and authority. He wrote:

God gave me unusual liberty and blessing in teaching and explaining the truths for which this movement stands, both audiences receiving the truth with great enthusiasm. I was tired and thought I wouldn't preach that night but the people wanted me to and then God anointed me for it.¹⁰

After the service, one of the white men in attendance invited him to his home for the night, which he accepted. While they were walking along, a small group of white men -- "white ruffians, extreme nigger-haters" -- stopped them. The men cursed Bosworth and accused him of being a trouble-maker.¹¹

⁸ "About Hearne," *Hearne: The Crossroads of Texas* [article on-line]; available from <http://rtis.com/reg/hearne/HearneAbout.htm> .

⁹ Norman Lowell McCarver Sr. and Norman Lowell McCarver Jr. "It Happened in Hearne," *Hearne on the Brazos* (San Antonio, TX: Century Press of Texas, 1958. accessed 27 August 2004) [book on-line]; available from <http://www.rootsweb.com/~txrober2/HOT-BltHappenedInHearne.htm> .

¹⁰ Letter, 1, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 2, 3; F.F. Bosworth, *Bosworth's Life Story: The Life Story of Evangelist F.F. Bosworth, As Told by Himself in the Alliance Tabernacle, Toronto* (Toronto, Ont.: Alliance Book Room), 12, 13. Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center; Eunice M. Perkins, *Joybringer Bosworth: His Life Story* (Dayton, OH: John J. Scruby, Distributor, 1921), 97-99.

“You come here to put us on a level with the damn niggers,” they said, staring menacingly at Bosworth and his friend. There was no doubt that the men wanted to shoot them. But God granted Bosworth boldness, wisdom and perfect coolness.

“I was doing God’s will the very best I knew how,” he said. “I am ready to die and will offer no resistance to anything God permit you to do.” Bosworth paused for a moment and said, “If you have no objections I would like to speak a few words of explanation before you shoot us.”

The men seemed reluctant to listen but they gave in. Bosworth then explained that he came to the meeting with no intention of putting the blacks on a level with whites. Rather, it was the white people who invited him to come. “I did the very best I knew and I’m willing to take anything God permits,” he said.

The men backed off, choosing to let Bosworth and his friend live. But they insisted that the preacher take the next train out. Bosworth and his friend turned and headed for the depot. He bought a ticket to Dallas and his friend went to a room for his suitcase. While his friend was inside, an angry mob of 25 men approached Bosworth who was standing outside. The men lunged at him with clubs made from the oars of a boat. They struck him repeatedly as they cursed and spat. “You’ll never preach again when we get through with you!” they said.

Bosworth, a slim figure, dropped in a bloody heap under the impact of the blows. One by one, the men pounded him as he tried to cover himself. He offered no resistance and as the blows struck his flesh, causing searing pain, he committed himself to God. He prayed that God would not allow them to break his spine. But with all the racial hatred they could muster, the men wield the clubs against the preacher’s back with all their might. For a moment, the men stopped. “Get up!” they ordered.

Bosworth tried to get up, but the men knocked him back down and slammed the lethal wood against his head and arms until he could hardly move. They told him again to get up. Nearly unconscious, Bosworth tried once again to stand. This time the men began pounding him with their fists. He crumbled to the ground, in the cinders of the tracks, trusting God to keep him alive.

After a while, the men tired. They permitted him to stand but would not allow him to take the train. Bosworth picked up his luggage that contained his cornet and important papers and began to walk the nine miles to Calvert, Texas. He felt a sharp pain in his left wrist: It was broken. His flesh had been mashed to the bone on his back all the way down to his knees. “Lord, help me,” he prayed. “Give me strength.”

Using his good arm, he grabbed his luggage and started walking. Along the way, he asked a section-man about a side-track where he could flag the train. He am-

bled to the location and “touched a lighted match to his bundle of papers when he saw the train coming, but the wind blew the light out before the engineer had seen it and the train whizzed past.”¹² There was nothing to do now but to continue walking. As he did, he prayed for the men who had threatened and beaten him. “The suffering during this period was terrible but as soon as it was over I looked away from wounds and bruises to God and He took away all suffering and put His power and strength upon me so that I carried a heavy suitcase with my right arm over nine miles.”¹³

Bosworth held “not the slightest anger towards the criminals and the walk to Calvert in the dark with moon light was the most heavenly experience of my life and the Lord gave me wonderful intercession for those men that He should forgive them and prepare them for his coming.”¹⁴ After walking all night, Bosworth finally reached home on Sunday evening. By that time, he felt joy in his soul and he could actually thank God for the experience. Like Christ and Stephen in Scripture, he found he could pray even more for his enemies.

Although Bosworth felt a sense of relief and jubilation, his family and friends felt otherwise, thinking his situation was far worse than it appeared. They were nervous and some of them broke down and cried when they saw his wounds. It would be a month before Bosworth could lie comfortably on his back. In all honesty, he was “lucky to get out alive,” according to John Melvin, current publisher of *The Hearne Democrat*, a weekly established in 1889. In those days, he said, “they’d kill you.”¹⁵

The local newspaper ignored the beating, which was no surprise considering the fact that very few of the papers ever reported on activities involving blacks at that time, noted Melvin. At any rate, a paper in Zion City reported on the incident but it did so with exaggerations, something that seemed to bother Bosworth. “The paper just came from Zion City telling about my beating,” he wrote. “Not much

¹² Perkins, 98. Blomgren Jr., Oscar. “Man of God: Fred F. Bosworth, Part IV: Bosworth Begins His Work,” *Herald of Faith*, Jan. 1964, 16-17.

¹³ Letter, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ John N. Melvin, publisher of the *Hearne Democrat*, interview by Roscoe Barnes III, Thursday, 24 June 2004. Phone interview. Baltimore, MD.

like the facts. My face was not scratched but my head was bruised in several places. No marks left on my face."¹⁶

As news spread about the beating, Bosworth's mother began to inquire. She, like others, was very concerned about his health and recovery. In a letter to her dated, Aug. 21, 1911, Bosworth talked at length about the beating he'd suffered. But he weighed his words carefully so as not to upset her. He, understandably, did not want his mother to worry. So he assured her that everything was going to be all right.

Just a short time after the assault, Bosworth discovered some surprising news about the two mobs: The leader of the first mob was killed when he was run over by a train and the leader of the second mob broke his neck and died when he was thrown from a car. The two incidents happened only a few weeks after they accosted and assaulted the young preacher. However, "the victim of their cruelties still lives to the praise, honor and glory of God," Bosworth wrote.¹⁷

The brave Pentecostal pioneer had stood his ground in what he believed -- and that without compromise. But it's worth noting that he was in no way a social activist to improve race relations. Yes, he was bold about ministering to all people and was willing to pay the price for doing so, yet, he viewed such a mission as something that must be arranged by God. For without God, any ministry of this type that involved the crossing of racial lines in the South would be futile and only lead to disaster.

In the letter to his mother, he made it clear that he was no longer ministering to blacks and would not do so unless God leads him. "You need not worry one bit," he wrote. "We are not now preaching to colored people and will not unless God clearly leads as he did when he led us to Queen City and other parts of Dallas. He put his seal upon this by saving many, healing many and baptizing over 225 with

¹⁶ Letter, 4. Although Bosworth mentioned that a newspaper in Zion had reported the incident, the report was not found in *The Leaves of Healing*, housed at Zion Benton Public Library. It also was not found in the *Zion-Benton News*.

¹⁷ The deaths of the two men were reported to Bosworth by a woman from Hearne, Texas, who visited his home in Sept. 1912. However, the deaths were not reported in the Hearne newspaper, something that seems strange for the current newspaper publisher. The publisher believes that such news would have certainly been published in the local newspaper, or at least in the regional papers.

the Holy Ghost. The deepest and quickest work I have known of. We do not lay our own plans but wait for him.”¹⁸

Stirred by this conviction and his love for all people, Bosworth would later minister with the Cleveland Coloured Gospel Quartette. The Quartette represented the finest in black gospel music. Each of its five members was saved through the Christian & Missionary Alliance. Bosworth and his brother, Burt, would invite the group to sing in large campaigns in Toronto, Pittsburgh, Toledo, Chicago and elsewhere.¹⁹

Yet, in spite of the suffering and the months of pain and recuperation, Bosworth and his family were happy and in the will of God. The experience, not surprisingly, would leave an indelible impression on him as a man of God. If he could look death in the face and endure a vicious beating and then walk nine miles with a broken arm, he could face anything in his future. Also, he could talk about the experience without fear or regret. He would recall the experience years later in an address before the Alliance Tabernacle in Toronto: “Now let me go back and relate an incident that I don’t like to tell, and my only reason for mentioning it is that God may be glorified.”²⁰

However, as Bosworth lay recovering from his wounds, he reflected on the persecution, and acknowledged his willingness to carry the cross and to be in God’s will no matter the cost. The experience made him feel he was “several notches higher” in his Christian walk. It deepened his devotion to Christ and strengthened his faith. At the same time, it allowed him to see how God can not only comfort him in a crisis, but also use the crisis as a means to bless others. Even more, he came to realize that suffering in this life can only lead to rewards in the life to come. He rejoiced as he remembered explicit promises in Scripture about suffering. The writings of the Apostle Paul were of great importance, particularly the passage in 2 Cor. 4:17-18: “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things that are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 4.

¹⁹ Robert L. Niklaus, John S. Sawn and Samuel J. Stoesz, *All for Jesus: God at Work in the Christian and Missionary Alliance Over One Hundred Years* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications Inc., 1986), 152, 168.

²⁰ *Bosworth’s Life Story*, 12.

According to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “unearned suffering is redemptive.”²¹ If this is true, then Bosworth was not unreasonable to expect grace, spiritual growth and fortitude following his ordeal. He wrote:

[God] has been so precious to me. Since that I have thanked Him many times for being privileged to know something of the ‘fellowship of his suffering.’ If this mob was the result of some unwise thing I had done or for speaking anything but His own sweet message, I would be very sorry, but since it came for plain obedience in preaching His gospel to every creature, it has given me great joy to experience this which was so common among the early Christians in the first centuries of the church.²²

Like the saints throughout the Scriptures, Bosworth considered it a blessing and an honor to suffer for the cause of Christ. He told his mother: “I would much prefer to be faithful and have some little tribulation now than to fail to overcome and have to pass through the great tribulation soon to come. Praise God I am determined to have God’s plan for my life carried out.”²³

25

²¹ Coretta Scott King, ed., *The Words of Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Newmarket Press, 1967), 52.

²² Letter, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.