

**SADHU SUNDAR SINGH:
THE APOSTLE WITH THE BLEEDING FEET**

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1. Introduction

Opposition, persecution, and suffering are some of the crosses that all Christians are called to bear in their lives. From Apostle Thomas to Graham Staines, Christian missionaries in India have had heartbreaking share in suffering and martyrdom for their faith. Christians in general, and the first-generation Christians in particular, especially in North India, have been the prime victims of opposition and persecution of varying degrees for the sake of their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ in almost every generation. Sadhu Sundar Singh's generation was no exception. The Sadhu himself was no exception. He testified, "Out of my long experience as a Sadhu and Sanyasi for Christ's sake, I can say with confidence that the Cross will bear those who bear the Cross, until it bears them up to heaven, into the actual Presence of the glorious Redeemer."¹

This article aims to explore the life of Sadhu Sundar Singh with special focus on his experiences of persecution and suffering for his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and preaching of His Good News to others. Several questions will be explored: Who was Sadhu Sundar Singh? Who were his main opponents and persecutors? How did the Sadhu respond to the challenges of trials and sufferings? What was his theology of the Cross? What can we learn from his experience and teachings about suffering and persecution? Based on Sadhu's own writings as well as scholarly interpretations of his major works, this article will seek to answer these and some related questions.

As a first-generation Christian myself, I am looking at the Sadhu's experiences and responses from the perspectives of a North Indian missionary-theologian and Christian historian. Until the writing of this article, I had only a general awareness of Sadhu's story. I have talked about him but only as though from a distance. Now I have explored him quite closely. In the course of my research, I have almost had a personal appointment with this great saint of Christ. Visiting his birthplace was a historic experience. Reading through his words of wisdom was a renewing and empowering experience. Sadhu's life is no simple Christian biography. It is an extraordinary story of a suffering Christian mystic, the barefoot evangelist, and a global messenger of Christ.

2. The Life and Legacy of Sadhu Sundar Singh

Not many of us may have noted that Sadhu Sundar Singh was a contemporary of three great sons of India: Gandhi, Tagore, and Radhakrishnan. Religious historian Eric J. Sharpe notes that in the 1920s, four personalities represented the image of India to the West (America and Europe): three Hindus and a Christian.² The first was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi who contributed an enigmatic combination of politics and ethics. The second was Rabindranath

¹ Friedrich Heiler, *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*. Translated from German by Olive Wyon (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1927), 118.

² Eric J. Sharpe, "The Legacy of Sadhu Sundar Singh," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, October 1990: 161. Most of Sadhu's early biographers have spelled his name "Sunder." However, Sadhu himself has spelled his name as "Sundar." In this article I have used Sundar and retained Sunder only in direct quotations.

Tagore the educationist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. The third was Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan the famous alumnus of Madras Christian College and renowned Hindu philosopher. The fourth was a Christian *Sadhu* (holy man). Unlike others, he was an evangelist (a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ), and a devotional writer. He was a Christian mystic and in many ways he was Jones' "Christ of the Indian Road."³ He was Sadhu Sundar Singh, the apostle with the bleeding feet, a unique interpreter of the Indian Christian experience to the West.

Birth, Family, and Upbringing. Sundar Singh was born on September 3, 1889, at Rampur, a small village near Doraha, Ludhiana (Punjab). He came from a strong Hinduised Sikh family. His father, Sardar Sher Singh, was a wealthy zamindar (a feudal landowner) and an influential man in the village. Some of his relatives were employed in the service of the king of Patiala (then a princely state). Thus the family claimed some royal patronage and prestige. Sardar Sher Singh wanted his son to become a soldier or at least a dedicated family man upholding the name and status of the household. Sundar's mother, whose name is not known, was a devout woman. She wanted her son to become a *sadhu*, a spiritual *guru*. With his mother's deep spiritual influence, Sundar was growing as a devoted and zealous Hindu. It is noted that by the age of seven, Sundar had memorized the entire Bhagwad Geeta. By appearance he was a Sikh and by devotion he was a staunch Hindu.

Sundar Singh received his early education at the local Christian school run by the American Presbyterian Mission with headquarters at Ludhiana. However, he ended up rebelling against the school authorities for teaching the Bible. Majority of the Christians in his area came from the lower castes and lived in poor conditions. Sundar was vehemently against learning the Book of the despised outcastes. He was also against the religion of the West. In his anger he even tore off the portions of the Bible and burnt it, an act for which he was deeply ashamed of after his conversion.

Conversion, Baptism, and the Call. From setting the Bible to fire to owning dearly the New Testament for the rest of his life, the conversion of Sundar Singh marked a powerful transformation. Even after digging deep into Hindu and Sikh teachings, Sundar had not found convincing answers to his questions. His religious teachers had merely silenced him by saying that as he grows in age, he will have the answers. He had lost his beloved mother and spiritual solace at the age of 14. Now he was frustrated and hopeless. Sundar's unrest and lack of peace led him to serious suicidal thoughts. But before ending his life, he decided to make a last call to God. So on the early morning of December 18, 1904, well before the sunrise, he took a ritual bath and began to pray so that God may reveal Himself to him. And Christ did appear to him in a vision at around 4:30 am. In his vision, Sundar Singh saw that a "bright radiance" had entered his room and flooded the entire place. In that radiance he saw Jesus's "luminous face." Then he says that Jesus showed him the "wounded palms where scars [caused by the nails on the cross] were clearly visible." And then Sundar heard Jesus say to him, "Why do you torment me? Behold, for your sake I gave my life on the cross, so that you and the world might win salvation."⁴

At once Sundar received the peace of Christ and his life was transformed forever. I can testify to this from my own personal experience; the Lord does appear to persons who

³ E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1925).

⁴ As quoted in Sharpe, "The Legacy of Sadhu Sundar Singh," *IBMR*, October 1990: 162. Sharpe's quote seems to be based on some unpublished account. Parker, has only this, "Why do you oppose me? I am your Saviour. I died on the cross for you." See, Rebeca Parker, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Called of God* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1920), 20.

seek Him earnestly and desperately.⁵ From an emerging enemy of the Cross, Sundar had now become a promising messenger and bearer of the Cross. Sundar was baptized on 3rd September 1905, his sixteenth birthday, in Shimla. Sundar had felt the call to carry the Gospel of Christ up in the mountains. These mountains included the regions of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nepal, Bhutan, and particularly Tibet.

A couple years after his conversion to Christ, Sundar Singh made an unsuccessful attempt to study theology at St. John's Divinity School, Lahore (now in Pakistan). However, he was to learn not in the convenience and four walls of a seminary but through pain and suffering amid real challenges. He wrote, "My [Heavenly] Father has called me to serve Him as [a] *fakir*, and I must obey this call."⁶ A *fakir* is a religious beggar, a monk and a *sanyasi*, who owns nothing. Sundar Singh was to witness for Christ as a Christian *sanyasi* leaving his footprints of legacy as a saffron-clad bleeding-feet suffering-saint.

The Legacy of the Sadhu. Sadhu Sundar Singh was last seen in April 1929. The Government of India presumed him dead in 1932. It is assumed that he may have either died in the snow mountains, martyred in a persecution in Tibet, or taken by God like Enoch (Gen. 5:24, Heb. 11:5). Throughout his life, Sadhu Sundar Singh was engaged in itinerant evangelism, teaching, baptizing, praying, and writing. He was a barefoot evangelist and a global messenger of Christ. He modeled a new discipleship. He exemplified a new Christianity after the East. He was a member of the secret Christian brotherhood, the Sanyasi Mission, situated in the Himalayas.⁷ The Sanyasi Mission included many followers of Christ from Hindu backgrounds. Sadhu Sundar Singh represented a new form of indigenous Christianity. He represented a new mysticism within Christianity. As a global missionary, he witnessed Christ almost all over the world including nations in Europe, West Asia, and the United States, besides his native India, neighbouring Nepal, and his favorite, Tibet.

The Sadhu's writings are new epistles and contain fresh revelations. His letters containing accounts of his evangelistic mission initially appeared in *Nur Afshan*, an Urdu Christian bulletin. His major publications include *Maktab-i-Masih* [School of Christ], *At the Master's Feet; Reality and Religion: Meditations on God, Man, and Nature; Meditations on Various Aspects of the Spiritual Life* and *Soul-Stirring Messages: A Collection of Sermons and Sayings of Sadhu Sundar Singh*.⁸ Sadhu Sundar Singh wrote from his experience. He described his visions and revelations from Christ presenting a whole new interpretation of what it means to be a follower of Christ. He narrated his mystic encounters with the Lord in the contexts of pain and suffering. He was a theologian of the Cross. He was a theologian of suffering for the sake of the Gospel.

3. Snapshots of the Sufferings of the Sadhu and His Response

Christian faith comes with a price. The cost of discipleship is suffering. In this section we will have a bird's eye view on the sufferings of Sadhu Sundar Singh, both caused by his own

⁵ The Lord Jesus appeared to me, following my three day fasting prayer in April 1996, and transformed my life forever. In my vision, Christ appeared to me in a bright shining light and said, "I am the resurrection and life. If you believe in me you will never die... Come follow me." At once my fear of death was translated into the assurance and joy of eternal life. My conversion story will be available in a forthcoming paper.

⁶ Alfred Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross: An Account of the Wonderful Life and Work of Sunder Singh, Wandering Christian Friar of the Punjab* (Allahabad: North India Tract and Book Society, 1917), 13. Italics mine.

⁷ On the Sanyasi Mission, see, Alfred Zahir, *Christ's Secret Disciples: A Sketch Account of the "Secret Sanyasi Mission" in the Words of Some of Their Own Missioners* (Moon Press, 1919). See also, Koch, Bernhard. *The Mystery of the Maharishi of Mt. Kailash: Sadhu Sundar Singh Meets the Over 300-year-old Prayer Warrior of Christ*. Germany: ReformaZion Media, 2016.

⁸ For publishing details, see the bibliography. Most of these titles are available online.

people and by others, locally as well as in the distant mission fields. We will also note his responses to his opponents and trials he had to go through for the sake of his love, commitment, and obedience to Christ.

Persecuted by His Own People. Sundar Singh experienced opposition and persecution right from his public confession of Jesus Christ as his personal saviour. According to Parker, “For nine months from that night [of his vision of Christ] onwards Sundar Singh was to pass from sorrow to sorrow, until he had drunk the cup of suffering to its bitterest dregs, for all that time he remained in his father’s house.”⁹ This cup of suffering was initially filled with verbal abuse and curses. This was all done in an attempt to make Sundar give up his Christian faith. Alfred Zahir notes that everyone would curse and abuse Sundar and that he was “singled out for every form of vituperation and calumny,”¹⁰ ... Sundar’s own brother had become his chief enemy. “Morning and evening his tongue was going incessantly anathematizing the woe-begone Sunder.”¹¹ Even Sundar’s father “kept dinning in his ears about the ruin and the disaster his persistence would inevitably bring on the family.”¹² In all this, Sundar Singh never responded with anger or a tit for tat attitude.

Beyond his family, Sundar suffered opposition from the entire village. Everyone in the village had become this young man’s enemy.¹³ Rahmat Ullah, the Muslim Patwari of the area, was one of his fiercest opponents.¹⁴ He always used abusive words against him. On one occasion Rahmat tore and threw away Sundar’s New Testament. Soon after this incident, Rahmat contracted cholera, a deadly disease. While passing by Rahmat’s house, Sundar happened to visit him on his deathbed and heard his confession. He told Sundar that he saw himself going to hell and saw Jesus also at a distance, but had no courage to call him for help and forgiveness. He knew that Jesus was “the only hope for sinners.”¹⁵ Sundar saw him depart from this world. Sundar had only forgiveness and sorrow in his heart for Rahmat.

As a result of Sundar’s conversion a fierce opposition had already come upon the handful poor Christians of the village. Zahir recounts that the entire village was filled with a spirit of bitterness against Christianity... shops were closed against the Christians... the Mission School became an object of hatred... parents withdrew their children and the missionaries had to shut down the school.¹⁶ Sundar was being prepared for his new exodus.

After about a week of Rahmat’s demise, Sundar Singh made an open and dangerous announcement. He cut off his long hair and declared that he was no longer a Sikh but a true Christian. This action was regarded as the very climax of shame and disgrace that Sundar had brought to his family and religion. He was asked to surrender all his clothes and belongings and then he was driven away into the nearby jungle.¹⁷ Earlier, Sundar’s friends were driven away from him and he had become very lonely. Now he has become homeless.

From the Rampur jungle, the homeless and wandering Sundar went to the mission compound at Roper and found a refuge among the Christians. Unfortunately he was soon struck by a paralysis and death seemed very near to him. A doctor diagnosed that Sundar was poisoned and had little chance of recovery. It was Sundar’s sister-in-law who had poisoned his food, moments before he was chased out of the house. Sundar Singh began to bleed

⁹ Rebeca Parker, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Called of God*, 22.

¹⁰ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 23.

¹¹ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 23.

¹² Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 24.

¹³ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 23.

¹⁴ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 26. Patwari is a government official who keeps record of the land ownership.

¹⁵ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 27-28.

¹⁶ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 24-25.

¹⁷ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 29.

heavily through the mouth. This was a sure sign of death. But soon he had a hiccup and got up all well. All were amazed at this miraculous recovery but Sundar said, “it was a great revelation of the love of God and I felt assured that my Master whose cross I had promised to bear would never allow me to sink under its heavy weight.”¹⁸ Sundar Singh had a great trust in the Lord during all his trials. He had a special conviction that Jesus will not let him die without allowing him to fulfill his call.

Persecuted by Other People. Sundar Singh’s call to minister in the mountains did not come with any assurance of safety, comfort, and honor or earthly rewards. He was neither sponsored for his mission trips nor welcomed in the places he wanted to bring the good news. Wherever he went—whether the hills, the plains, or the valleys—suffering awaited this man of God. He rarely had a warm and friendly welcome in his mission fields.

Once at Rishikesh, Uttarakhand, while Sundar Singh was preaching the gospel, some people mocked him. He would not take any notice of such oppositions and carry on with his message.¹⁹ In the same place, an opponent by the name of Sita Ram threw sand in his eyes. This severely disrupted Sundar’s preaching. But instead of getting upset, he calmly got up, went into the river, washed his eyes, and came back looking for Sita Ram. Having found that the crowd had handed him over to the police, he went to the police and requested that Sita Ram be released. Then he continued to preach. Sita Ram at once repented and became his disciple. He fell at the Sadhu’s feet and with tears made the following confession, “Woe unto me, ... before I threw sand into *your* eyes, the Devil had thrown sand into *my* eyes, which blinded me so completely that I could neither see your affectionate heart nor conceive the Lord Jesus who dwells therein.”²⁰ Apparently Sita Ram had been in search of “a Guru who could wash away all the filth” from his heart, “and fill it with heavenly bliss.”²¹ Now he had found Him through Sadhu Sundar Singh. Such a heart-transforming impact could only be generated by a graceful and forgiving response, a truly Christ-like response of the Sadhu.

A similar incident took place at Narkanda village in Himachal Pradesh. Sundar Singh went into a corn field and started preaching to the farmers. Many of them started abusing him. One of them got so upset that he hit Sadhu with a stone. But to everyone’s surprise he himself had an instant headache and could no longer work. Seeing this, Sundar Singh took his place and began to reap corn. All he said was, “O! God forgive them!”²² As a result of this unexpected gentle response, the Sadhu was invited to their home where he prayed and preached the Gospel.

On one occasion, Sundar Singh was imprisoned in Tehri, Uttarakhand. The locals had tried to chase him out of the area. And after repeated failure, they had him arrested and put in jail. But Sadhu never lost an opportunity to preach. He began to share the Gospel with the inmates and many of them started to believe in Jesus. Seeing his spiritual impact among the prisoners, Sadhu was at once released from the jail and officially driven out of the area.²³ Preaching in the prison, even while a prisoner like the Apostle Paul, calls for a special anointing and commitment for the cause of Christ.

Two of the severest and seriously life threatening tortures were inflicted upon the Sadhu in Nepal and Tibet. In Nepal, at a place called Ilam, he was arrested, stripped of his

¹⁸ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 30.

¹⁹ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 9. For a history of Christianity in Uttarakhand, see, Shivraj K. Mahendra, *A Christian History of Uttarakhand, Vol. I: Origin and Identities* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2014).

²⁰ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 9. Emphasis original.

²¹ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 9.

²² Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 8. See also, E. Sanders and Ethelred Judah, *Sundar Singh: The Lion-Hearted Warrior*, 80-81.

²³ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 69.

clothes in a market place, his feet and hands were fastened into holes in upright boards, and kept in this crippled position for a whole day and night. No one gave him food or water. Instead, to add to his pain, leeches were thrown over his naked body. Such an unimaginable agony! Sundar Singh would have surely died as the leeches sucked his life-blood the entire night. But to the great surprise and dread of his persecutors, the Sadhu was found alive the next day. They at once released him. Sadhu says that he had spent that agonizing night with a heart full of joy singing praises to God.²⁴ This incident took place in 1914. In situations that would naturally provoke a person to anger, frustration, and complaints, the Sadhu was able to praise, forgive, and move on with the unwavering mission of preaching the Gospel.

In Tibet, wherever he went, his message was generally met with enmity and hatred, especially among the Buddhist monks. He was often warned to stop preaching or to leave the area. But he never heeded to such threats.²⁵ One day in a place called Rasar he was arrested and brought before the Lama. He was accused of entering the country without a passport and of preaching heresy [Christianity]. The accusation being found true, Sundar was ordered to be thrown into a deep, dirty, and deadly well. This was the usual form of punishing the most heinous crimes against the State. Sundar Singh narrated his experience: "Everywhere I laid my hands I felt nothing but bones and skulls, and there was such a smell in the place that it almost drove me mad."²⁶ He was locked in that abode of death for three days. However, he was miraculously rescued and restored by a mysterious helper on the third day in the middle of the night. This special helper, an angel of the Lord, has been with the Sadhu in almost all his trials, strengthening him and liberating him.²⁷ No amount of persecution was ever able to stop the Sadhu from preaching the gospel. In fact, he went back fearlessly to the places where people had tried to take his very life. And he never harbored any hard feelings against his persecutors.

In addition to rejection and opposition from his family and others, the Sadhu also experienced disappointments from some Christians, the people from whom he expected a better treatment. In Nasik (Maharashtra), during one blazing summer, when he had gone without food for days, was weak, and tired, he went to seek help from Christians at a mission bungalow. Sadly, the missionary, without even listening to the Sadhu, said that he couldn't help him. It is not that he did not know who the Sadhu was. Looking at his pitiful condition anyone would have offered him some food and shelter, but not this Christian. This was brutal. "I nearly wept," reflected Sadhu Sundar Singh, "on being thus lightly treated by those from whom I expected the most and could well imagine the anguish of my Master's heart when he said, 'I came to my own and my own received me not.'"²⁸ Such experiences of disrespect and rejection did not make him bitter. Instead, they drew him close to the experience of Jesus Himself. Jesus was the Suffering Servant. And so was the Sadhu. Their mission was to carry the Cross for the salvation of others.

4. The Bleeding Feet in the Shadow of the Cross

Sadhu Sundar Singh's compassionate response to his persecutors comes from his call to suffer, to bleed and to die, for the sake of the Gospel. It also comes from an unwavering commitment and obedience to Jesus Christ as Lord and Master of his life. In this section we

²⁴ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 75-76. See also, Parker, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Called of God*, 54-56.

²⁵ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 50.

²⁶ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 61-62. See also, E. Sanders and Ethelred Judah, *Sundar Singh: The Lion-Hearted Warrior*, 52ff.

²⁷ A detailed account is also found in Parker, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Called of God*, 64-66.

²⁸ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 46. Emphasis original. Cf. John 1:11 paraphrased from KJV. Scripture reference is not given by Sadhu or his biographer Alfred Zahir.

will briefly look at the background of the concept of “the bleeding feet” which has given the Sadhu a unique identity. In addition, we will briefly explore his theology of the Cross.

The Apostle with the Bleeding Feet. How did the Sadhu come to be known as the apostle with the bleeding feet? One of Sadhu’s Sri Lankan admirers once testified, “His resolution to walk barefooted amidst the perpetual snows of Tibet is the mark of his invincible determination to bring men to Christ.”²⁹ It was the journey to Tibet that had caused the Sadhu to wound himself the most. During one of his visits, he was coming down a snowy mountain and cut his toe on a sharp stone. As he walked along to bandage and rest, he left bright red footprints of blood on the snowy path. This is where he met Tashi, the chief secretary of the Lama, who was resting not far from the spot on his way home. Tashi remarked, “Looking at your bleeding foot, something within me seemed to say there must be some great power behind this life of happy self-denial.”³⁰ Within ten days of this meeting, Sundar Singh baptized Tashi and his family.

It is important to note that the Sadhu never wore shoes. He toured all over India bare footed, bare headed, dressed in a thin saffron cassock, wearing a small turban, keeping a blanket on his shoulders, and only the New Testament in his hand. He did not accept anything more, he would not ask for anything at all. It was rightly said, “*even by his bleeding feet he attracts men to Christ.*”³¹ And he truly did. The theology of the bleeding feet is a theology of acute renunciation of any comfort and protection. This can be practiced by only those who are given special grace to suffer. This can also be a significant approach in redefining Christianity to make it contextually relevant.

In Sundar Singh’s twentieth century North India, the term “Christian” had gained the connotation of worldliness and inferiority. This was similar to Robert de Nobili’s sixteenth century South India where Christians were known as *parangis*, meaning “inferior and immoral,” and their religion as *parangi margam*, the way of the drunkard, beef eaters, and low caste people.³² Apparently this caricatured identity of Christianity was insensitively presented by nominal Christians, both foreigner and local. But it definitely placed serious challenges for missionaries and converts in their identity, honour, and witness. It is in such a context that the Sadhu chose the self-denying Sadhu-ideal as the right way to follow and witness Christ. In doing so, Sadhu has proved to the world that in no sense Christianity was about worldliness, material prosperity, comfort, immorality, or sinfulness. Instead, he has exemplified through his own bleeding feet that in every sense Christianity was all about self-denial, self-sacrifice, high morality, holiness, and suffering and pain.

The Sadhu had a very positive view of pain and suffering for the sake of the Gospel. To him they were mysterious experiences. He acknowledged their reality in the world but not without showing their cause and remedy. He said, “It is difficult to understand the mystery of pain and suffering in the world. Ultimately, the root of suffering is found in sin, in separation from God. Still, God uses suffering to call us into the peace of his presence.”³³ Peace of Christ through suffering for the sake of the Gospel was at the heart of Sadhu’s theology of the Cross.

A Theology of the Cross. The courage to walk with the bleeding feet, which represents the physical suffering, can only come from the conviction and dedication to bear the cross, which

²⁹ Parker, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Called of God*, 63.

³⁰ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 64.

³¹ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 1. Emphasis original.

³² See, Arthur Jeyakumar, *History of Christianity in India: Selected Themes* (Kolkata: SCEPTRE, 2013), 27.

³³ As quoted by Kim Comer, ed., *Wisdom of the Sadhu: Teachings of Sundar Singh* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2007), 141.

represents both suffering and joy, physical as well as spiritual. But envisioning and experiencing joy in the shadow of the cross amid all sorts of pain requires a special perspective which the Sadhu was blessed to have. He testified,

I thank God that He has chosen unworthy me in the days of my youth [so] that I may spend the days of my strength in His service... Now although I have suffered hunger, thirst, cold, heat, imprisonment, maledictions, bodily infirmities, persecution and innumerable other evils, yet I thank and bless His holy name that through His grace my heart is ever full of joy, and from my 10 years' experience I can unhesitatingly say that *the Cross bears those who bear the cross.*"³⁴

At least three theological insights may be drawn from the above testimony of the Sadhu. First, there is an expressed gratitude to God for the call and selection to serve in His mission. Second, there is a clear conviction that it is the grace of God which enables a disciple of Christ to experience joy in the midst of suffering. And finally, there is a fresh new perspective that it is not just the sufferer who bears the cross but even the cross bears its bearer. This is deep. What a comfort to realize that it is not really us who are carrying the cross but the cross itself is carrying us. Christ has already carried the cross and become victorious. It is His victory over suffering and death that ensures our joy and peace in the midst of all pain and pathos.

Sadhu's theology of the cross gives answers to tough questions about the purpose of suffering and significance of the cross. These answers come directly from Jesus to Sadhu in one of his visions. When the disciple (Sadhu) asks the Master (Jesus) about the meaning and purpose of the cross and why do pain and suffering exist in the world, the Master replies:

The cross is the key to heaven... heaven...by reason of sin was closed to believers, ...as soon as believers take up their cross and follow Me they enter heaven through Me (John 10: 9) and begin the enjoyment of that unbounded bliss which the world cannot understand, for heaven is closed to unbelief. ...Those who joyfully take up My cross are themselves upborne by it, and ever supported by that cross they enter heaven at last.³⁵

The Cross is thus a password to heaven and heavenly bliss on earth for the believer. In fact the purpose of the cross is to bear its very bearer and lead them to heaven. The Master further explains, "The cross is like a walnut whose outer rind is bitter, but the inner kernel is pleasant and invigorating"... Thus the cross does not have any outward charm, but "to the cross-bearer its true character is revealed, and he finds in it the choicest sweets of spiritual peace."³⁶ The cross symbolizes suffering but also contains peace and joy amid pain.

The Master also teaches the disciple that "pain arises out of man's perverse and rebellious nature," ... and since "the laws of God are intended for the spiritual health and happiness of man, opposition to them brings about spiritual pain and suffering."³⁷ The Lord further explains,

Pain and suffering are bitter as poison, but it is also well known that sometimes the antidote of a poison is itself a poison. And thus I sometimes employ pain and

³⁴ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 14. Emphasis original. Cf. Heiler, *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 118.

³⁵ Sadhu Sundar Singh, *At the Master's Feet*. Translated from Urdu by Arthur and Rebeca Parker (London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1922), 37.

³⁶ Singh, *At the Master's Feet*, 38. See also, Hiler, *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 117.

³⁷ Singh, *At the Master's Feet*, 37.

suffering as bitter medicines in order to promote the spiritual health and vigour of My believers. As soon as their perfect health is secured there will be an end of all suffering. Their pain is no pleasure to Me, for My one object is their eternal well-being (Lam. 3: 31, 33).³⁸

Sundar Singh distinguishes between spiritual anguish and physical pain. To him, “physical pain is the result of illness or injury, but spiritual anguish is the result of sin and separation from God.”³⁹ And God can use the anguish as a reminder that “we are pilgrims and strangers in this world.”⁴⁰ Pain and suffering are designed, in Sadhu’s vision, for the spiritual empowerment and wellbeing of the believers. In fact, suffering or daily dying is greater than martyrdom. The Master taught the Sadhu,

For believers it would sometimes be an easy thing to become a martyr to My Name, but I also need *living* witnesses who will daily offer themselves as living sacrifices for the salvation of others (1 Cor. 15: 31). For death is easy, but it is hard to live, for a believer’s life is a daily dying. But those who are thus ready to lay down their lives for My sake shall share My glory and live with Me forever in fullness of joy.⁴¹

Sadhu Sundar Singh reflects, “It is a strange thing. It is not joy in suffering that Christ gives, but He turns the suffering itself into joy.”⁴² In the *Wisdom of the Sadhu*, Sundar Singh challenges his readers to choose suffering like Christ. He says, “Yesu [Jesus] was melted in the Garden of Gethsemane and gave his life on the cross to open the gate of heaven for all. In the same spirit, we must be prepared to give up our own lives for the spiritual welfare of others.”⁴³

The cross of Christ is the greatest reality for the Sadhu. He says, “There is nothing higher than the Cross in earth or heaven.” He believes that through the Cross God reveals His love to us. He is convinced that “Without the Cross we should know nothing of the love of our Heavenly Father. For this reason God desires all His children to bear this heavy but sweet burden; for only in this way can our love to God and His to us become visible to others.”⁴⁴ The challenge of Sundar Singh’s theology of the cross is this: “If we do not bear the cross of the Master, we will have to bear the cross of the world...”⁴⁵ While the Master’s cross takes its bearers safely to heaven, “the cross of this world actually drags us down and leads to destruction.”⁴⁶ Which cross will we take up? This remains a missiological question.

5. Missiological Implications

We live in a world that celebrates success, worships material prosperity, and despises suffering. However, the reality of suffering and persecution continues to define our existence

³⁸ Singh, *At the Master’s Feet*, 37.

³⁹ Kim Comer, ed., *Wisdom of the Sadhu: Teachings of Sundar Singh* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2007), 142-143.

⁴⁰ Comer, *Wisdom of the Sadhu: Teachings of Sundar Singh*, 142-143.

⁴¹ Singh, *At the Master’s Feet*, 40. Emphasis original.

⁴² As quoted in T. E. Riddle, *The Vision and the Call: A Life of Sadhu Sundar Singh*. Delhi: ISPCK, (1987), 22.

⁴³ Comer, *Wisdom of the Sadhu*, 137.

⁴⁴ Heiler, *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 118.

⁴⁵ Comer, *Wisdom of the Sadhu*, 150.

⁴⁶ Comer, *Wisdom of the Sadhu*, 150.

and identity as Christians especially in nations where we are a minority.⁴⁷ Just a century ago Sadhu Sundar Singh lived in a world no different than ours. But he had set his mind on the heavenly, even when the path was made of suffering and trials. We can draw several implications from his experiences.

The Call to Accept the Reality of Suffering in Mission. According to missiologist Scott Sunquist, “Suffering is inescapable as a central element in God’s redemption... Suffering is very much a part of Christian existence... As people who participate in Christ’s salvation, we also are called through suffering (which is temporary) to that which is glorious (and eternal).”⁴⁸ In the twentieth century, no one had realized and applied this element in their life and ministry more than Sadhu Sundar Singh. Suffering for the sake of Gospel was a lifestyle for him. He truly participated in Christ’s mission of salvation through intentionally bearing the cross all his life. He was truly an apostle of the bleeding feet and an evangelist of the cross. While many of us may be trying to avoid the cross and seek security and comfort, the Sadhu is calling us to abandon comfort, be willing to suffer, and take risks for the sake of the Gospel.

The Call to a Liberative Response. Sadhu’s response to his persecutors was also like his Master. In fact we see a threefold pattern in his response: forgive, stay focused, and move on. This may be called a liberative response. A response like Christ, a response free from bitterness and open to salvific forgiveness. Just as Jesus taught and practiced forgiveness even those who were taking his life, Sundar Singh unmistakably followed the example of Christ. He never abused those who abused him. Never cursed those who troubled him. He did not complain at all. He forgave them all. Also, no situation could make Sadhu lose his focus. He was always focussed on his mission. He preached the Gospel, prayed for the needy, and worshiped His Lord in all circumstances. Nothing could stop him from carrying out his mission. Finally, like a committed apostle, he kept on moving where he was led by the Spirit of God. He never settled down in one place. Never founded an organization or institution where he could live in comfort. Places like Subathu and Kotgarh in Himachal, where he frequently stayed, were only temporary stations for him. He was not bound by geographic, political, or denominational boundaries. Just like Jesus, Sadhu walked in the world in complete surrender and obedience to Christ, imitating His suffering and practicing His forgiveness.

The Call to Careful Imitation of the Sadhu. Alfred Zahir cautions and urges that no one should “ever contemplate this life [of a sadhu], unless like Sundar Singh he can say from his heart, ‘*I have vowed my life to Him and His grace abiding I shall never break this vow.*’”⁴⁹ This should also be said about becoming a follower and servant of Christ. No one should enter into Christian ministry without a direct and clear call from the Lord. Far from suffering in obedience, nominal Christians and Christians in ministry as business are doing much harm to the body of Christ. We need Sadhu-like Christians like never before. T. E. Riddle comments,

⁴⁷ For a brief study on persecution, see, Shivraj K. Mahendra, “The Persecution of Christians in the World: Exploring a Major Trend in Global Christianity,” *New Life Theological Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (July-December 2016): 33-45.

⁴⁸ Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), xiii-xiv.

⁴⁹ Zahir, *A Lover of the Cross*, 4. Emphasis original.

What a witness the Sadhu has left for the Church in India and for the Church throughout the world! He chose the way of humble obedience to the will of God as revealed in Christ. It led him into much suffering and trial, but in it he found the joy and peace of his Lord. For every seeker of God, Sundar Singh has marked out a royal road.⁵⁰

C. F. Andrews noted “In every new trial of faith, he [Sadhu] had Jesus, his Lord and Master, by his side, strengthening and upholding him. Thus, while he drank deeply of the cup of suffering, there was a spiritual power sustaining him...”⁵¹ Christians truly obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ will never lack strength and sustenance from the Lord, no matter how difficult their context of ministry is. Christian ministry that is modeled after Christ is always done in the shadow of the Cross.

7. Conclusion

This article has briefly explored the life and ministry of the great Christian *sanyasi*, Sadhu Sundar Singh, with special reference to his experiences of persecution and suffering. In the process, an attempt has been made to explore his theology of the cross and underline its significance for Christian life and thought. We have also drawn select missiological implications for Christian life, mission, and witness today. Sadhu Sundar Singh was not called the Apostle with the bleeding feet for namesake. He truly shed his blood for the sake of the Gospel. He literally carried the cross of suffering all through his life. He was convinced about his call to suffer. He declared, “Our Saviour says that we are the salt of the earth. Salt does not impart its flavour to other things until it is dissolved... we can only redeem others by giving ourselves up for them.”⁵² Salvation demands sacrifice. That is why Christ died for humanity. His salvific and sacrificial death on the cross is unique and unparalleled in world history. After Christ and his apostles and countless Christian martyrs in history, a similar example of self-sacrifice is set by Sadhu Sundar Singh. Reflecting on Sadhu’s impact on others, his biographer Rebeca Parker comments,

Herein lies the great secret of Sadhu Sundar Singh’s power over men wherever he goes. Taking the old ideal of renunciation he has spiritualized it, and men see in him a reflection of the great renunciation of Christ Himself—not seeking suffering for suffering’s own sake, as in the case with Hindu asceticism, but enduring it with cheerful acceptance as the will of God for him.⁵³

When the world continues to attract, allure and misguide us, may we have the resolution of the Sadhu to deny the self. When suffering for Christ continues to be despised around us, may we have his passion and commitment to carry our crosses. May our generation be touched by the example of Sadhu’s life of suffering and unwavering commitment to preach the Gospel. May the Master of Sadhu Sundar Singh enable us to give ourselves to be dissolved for the salvation of others. Yet not for the sake of our name, credit or pride, but for being a living witness of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God.

⁵⁰ Riddle, *The Vision and the Call*, 43.

⁵¹ C. F. Andrews, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934), vii-viii.

⁵² Heiler, *The Gospel of Sadhu Sundar Singh*, 124.

⁵³ Parker, *Sadhu Sundar Singh: Called of God*, 10.