

Burned Alive for their Faith

Dr. Graham Stuart Staines, an Australian Christian missionary, and two of his sons – Philip, 10, and Timothy, 6 – were burned to death by a gang while sleeping in his station wagon at a Manoharpur village in Odisha, India, on Jan. 22, 1999.

Earlier that night, Staines had attended a jungle camp in Manoharpur, an annual gathering of Christians of the area for religious and social discourse. He and his two sons had decided to spend the night in Manoharpur, sleeping in the vehicle because of the severe cold. His wife, Gladys, and daughter, Esther, had remained in Baripeda, where the family had lived and managed a mission since 1983. Graham and Gladys had met in 1981 while working with leprosy patients, were married in 1983, and had worked together in the mission since then.

A Hindu activist group had grown tired of the Staines' love and their sharing the gospel of Christ. They surrounded the station wagon, blocked the doors so Staines and his boys couldn't get out, and poured gasoline over the vehicle.

Graham and his sons were burned alive as the angry mob shouted political and religious slogans. Dara Singh, a Bajrang Dal activist, was convicted in 2003 of leading the gang that murdered Staines and his sons, and was sentenced to life in prison.

One of the accused killers, Mahendra Hembram, stated that the killers "were provoked by the 'corruption of culture' by the missionaries, who they claimed fed villagers beef and gave women brassieres and sanitary towels."

The murders were widely condemned by religious and civic leaders, politicians, journalists and the prime minister of India.

A few days after the death of Staines and the boys, Gladys publically forgave the killers for what they had done. Headlines throughout India proclaimed this act of grace, and many people wondered why a man would willingly expose his family to such danger and what would drive a grieving wife and mother to offer forgiveness despite such circumstances. The answer is that Jesus taught we should forgive abundantly as God has forgiven us.

Gladys continued to live in India after the incident, caring for patients, until she returned to Australia in 2004. In 2005, she was awarded the fourth highest civilian honor in India, Padma Shree, in recognition of her work with leprosy patients.

Her actions are instructive for us. When we fail to forgive, we forget that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." When we struggle to forgive someone, we should remember God's forgiveness and seek to forgive them just as we have been forgiven.

We have redemption in Him through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7).