

Praying for the Persecuted
Romans 8:35-37

Andronicus was a citizen in the Roman Empire in 303 AD, shortly before Christianity was legalized. He had been thrown into prison because he was unwilling to deny his faith. Then he was whipped and his bleeding wounds were rubbed with salt. He was brought out from prison and tortured again, thrown to the wild beasts, and finally killed with a sword. Here's what he said to his persecutors before it began:

“Do your worst, I am a Christian. Christ is my help and supporter, and thus armed I will never serve your gods nor do I fear your authority or that of your master, the Emperor. Commence your torments as soon as you please, and make use of every means that your malignity can invent, and you shall find in the end that I am not to be shaken from my resolution.” And he wasn't. Andronicus was a brave martyr who stood steadfast to the end.

Today, November 3, 2019, is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. It's hard to believe, especially from over here in North America, that there would be persecution in today's so-called modern age. But in fact, there were close to 100 million martyrs in the 20th century. More people were martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ in the 20th century than in all the previous nineteen combined. More people died in circumstances related to their faith in the 20th century than in all the 20th century wars combined. According to a study by a Christian research firm, over 900,000 Christians have been martyred from 2005 to 2015, an average of 90,000 killed every year around the world. And according to an organization called The Voice of the Martyrs, based in Bartlesville, OK, in the year 2000, over 425 people a day lost their lives, and the number is actually increasing as we go through the 21st century.

We have been going through a series called “Plugged In” and have studying what the Bible says about prayer and how it benefits us. Today we are looking at how it benefits others, specifically, those who have experienced suffering and persecution that we may never experience. That’s why this message is entitled “Praying for the Persecuted”. Let’s read Romans 8:35-37.

Persecution is not new to this generation. Over the years, many godly men and women have died for their faith in Jesus. People since the time of Christ have chosen to be tortured and put to death because of their belief in the Savior. And many did it with a surprising peace.

Ignatius, a disciple of John, was devoured by wild animals in Rome in the year 111 AD. BTW, AD is Anno Domini which means “In the year of our Lord” and not “After Death” which some people wrongly think. Anyway, this is what Ignatius said: “My dear Jesus, my Savior, is so deeply written in my heart, that I feel confident that if my heart were to be cut open and chopped into pieces, the name of Jesus would be found on every piece.”

And the confidence they had is impressive. Justin, who became known as Justin Martyr, who was killed in Rome in 165 AD, said this: “You can kill us but you cannot do us any real harm.”

Maurice Blanc, who was martyred in 1547, said, “Lord God, these men take away my life full of misery, but You will give me life everlasting.”

These Christians were absolutely convinced that there was something far superior waiting them afterwards, as long as they remained faithful in this life. “We shall not end our lives in the fire, but make a change for a better life.” These words were spoken by Julius Palmer, who was burned at the stake in England, 1556.

You see, ultimately this life is not really ours. We try to cling to it, to milk it for all its worth, but really, we can never keep what it has to offer. You have likely

heard these words: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” These were spoken by Jim Eliot, who was speared by headhunters in Ecuador while serving there as a missionary in 1956.

It’s not that these folks had a death-wish. I’m sure they didn’t really want to die. Pastor Li De Xian, of the horribly persecuted Mainland China, said about two decades ago, “Humanly speaking, we know that no one likes to suffer physically. But I know that if the Lord leads me into it, He will give me the strength to survive it.”

And today, a day set aside to pray for those being persecuted, I want us to remember our Chinese brothers and sisters. Christians are growing in number in China. Perhaps, that’s why China has increased their level of persecution of Christians over there. At first, the Chinese authorities have ordered all churches to remove the cross on top of their buildings and if they didn’t comply, the crosses were forcibly removed anyway by the police. And then, a new wave of persecution came when buildings themselves were closed or demolished just like what happened to this church in southeast China. This picture shows the police forming a human wall in front of Xunsiding Church in Fujian province so that church members couldn’t enter it.

And then, there’s also the case of another church in China where a demolition crew hired by local authorities surrounded a house church in Zhengzhou, Henan, province at 11:30 PM. During a scuffle with the work crew, a Christian man who was at the house church with his wife was severely beaten, suffering three severed tendons in his wrist. He was later taken to a hospital unconscious. Church members were able to rescue only a few pieces of furniture before the church was demolished.

And in China, it's not uncommon to hear pastors being imprisoned and tortured for their faith. Of course, the same fate faces those who profess being Christians.

How about in India? Christians are under severe persecution as well. For sure they were persecuted in the past but they are harassed so much more since the new government issued a policy of "Hindu-Only" India. Hindu Radicals have hunted Christians, even killing them.

Like what they did to Pastor Mahesh. On July 19, Pastor Mahesh was leading a prayer meeting in Tamil Nadu state, when three Hindu extremists entered the building and began to beat him with a metal rod. The pastor, who leads a church of 25 members in another village, has been ministering in the area for five years and recently began leading a prayer meeting on Friday evenings in the village where he was attacked. The pastor was severely beaten before bystanders could protect him from the extremists. He was admitted to a hospital with head wounds and a left shoulder fracture.

Christians are in danger not only from Hindu Radicals but from Communist Radicals as well. Pastor Saanvi had shared the gospel in villages near his home for the past six years as a bi-vocational minister, even planting house churches in two of the villages. Though members of the local Naxalite group, who subscribe to a Marxist-Leninist political philosophy, had repeatedly warned him to stop his ministry work, he continued to tell his neighbors about Jesus. Then, one evening, the Naxalites appeared at Saanvi's door and asked him to accompany them. Sensing something was wrong, his wife, Saisha, followed at a distance, carrying their two children. When she saw her husband tied to a tree, she began pleading with them to let Saanvi go. Instead, however, they beheaded him in front of her and their children.

Folks these are just a few examples of the horrifying ordeal that our Christian brothers and sisters in persecuted countries are experiencing. But China and India aren't even the worst countries out there. The organization Open Doors publishes a list called the World Watch List. It compiles the world's worst offenders of religious liberty, in particular against Christians. A specially-designed questionnaire is used to compile the World Watch List.

And the most recent survey gave this as the top ten worst offenders:

- 1- North Korea
- 2 - Afghanistan
- 3 - Somalia
- 4 - Libya
- 5 - Pakistan
- 6 - Sudan
- 7 - Eritrea
- 8 - Yemen
- 9 - Iran
- 10 – India

As we can see, North Korea is #1. And it has been #1 for the past 18 years. Well, it is a Communist country as well all know. And the North Korean regime is very brutal. Meanwhile, #2 Afghanistan and #9 Iran are all Islamic countries while #10 India is Hindu.

Now, I'd like us to watch a short film about the story of a pastor in North Korea and his disciple named Sang-chul.

VIDEO

So what can we do about these kinds of situations? Well, we can certainly pray. It may seem like a small thing, but in fact, it is not. Look what the Scriptures tell us...

Hebrews 13:3 – “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Also, Paul writes in Colossians 4:18: “Remember my chains.”

The concept of being a body, of helping one another, is impossible to get away from, too. Galatians 6:2 – “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Romans 12:15 – “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” And 1 Corinthians 12:26 – “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

Paul says in Colossians 4:3-4 – “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.” Paul wanted to be able to be a witness of God’s love while he was in prison.

So we can pray for Sang-chul as he bravely shares Jesus with other North Koreans. Let’s pray that God will protect him and that many more Sang-chuls will proclaim Jesus in that dark land.

You see, prayers matter. They work. They worked for Rinaldy Damanik of Indonesia. He was arrested in September 11, 2002, charged with the possession of homemade firearms that were allegedly confiscated when his vehicle was searched. But really, he was just a pawn in the ongoing conflict between Christians and Muslims in Poso, that has claimed over 2000 lives during the three years of violence. On June 16, 2003 Damanik was sentenced to three years imprisonment for illegal weapons possession.

On November 9, 2003, Rinaldy Damanik was released from prison after 791 days there. This is an answer to prayer. While in prison he received over 26,000 letters from Christians around the world. That’s the body of Christ in action, supporting the persecuted, lifting up the prisoners.

This, in case you hadn't noticed yet, is real life for Christians. Jesus himself said that "In this world you will have trouble." Yes, we will be in trouble. But guess what, in our troubles, Jesus is there. He assures us of his presence and his victory over our enemies. The second part of the verse says, "But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

In this country, Christians are facing persecution as well as we are facing more and more challenges to our faith in a society that's getting more and more immoral and godless. Or, perhaps, you've experienced persecution in the sense that you were ostracized or ignored by friends or relatives, even by parents, when they learned you became a Christian. Or maybe you were bullied or harassed in school or at work because of your faith. In my case, the closest I got to being persecuted was years ago in Australia. Every Thursday night, a friend of mine, a missionary and myself would position ourselves on the street leading to a big mall and we distributed gospel tracts. There were three male teenagers who would pass by always and scare us by swearing at us or just saying mean things. One time, the tallest of them even like brushed me aside physically and so I punched him. No, I just said, "Jesus loves you". But let's face it, we haven't reached the point yet when our faith is severely tested. We haven't come to the point when we had to make a choice between life and death because of our stand for Jesus.

What's ironic is that believers in persecuted countries have a more vibrant faith than most Christians in America have. It was CS Lewis who said, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you." And since we have never been pushed to that limit, we don't know how it really means to be persecuted. But many in persecuted countries do.

At this time, let us set aside a few minutes to pray for our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters.