

Sunday for Persecuted Christians, May 30th, Trinity Sunday.
Romans 8:12-21 but also Isaiah 6 and John 3

‘Our present sufferings Paul writes.’

2Qs. 1. When you think of Christian persecution, what comes to mind? Pause. Think. Talk to those with you.

2. How widespread do you think Christian persecution is today? (words on a screen)

PERCEIVE

Three stories...

ABDUL

Abdul tensed as he heard the angry voices nearing his home in Central Asia. Suddenly, a group of young Muslims crashed through his door and began threatening him. “If you don’t renounce Christ, you’ll regret it!” they shouted. But Abdul refused. “I might be kicked out of the village, I could be beaten, but Jesus went through it all. If my Lord faced persecution, who am I not to expect the same treatment?” he said.

HIAN AND PHUNG

On a road in Vietnam, Hian and Phung glanced at each other as they placed the last of the hymn books on the back of their motorcycles—each knowing the risks if they were caught. They set out anyway, determined to transport hymn books to those in need. While en route, they came upon Vietnamese authorities. A quick search revealed the hidden cargo and brought their mission to an abrupt halt. Authorities seized the hymn books, along with their motorcycles, and sent Hian and Phung to a jail in Southern Laos.

LILY AND AVA

“Lily!” The young girl turned as she heard her mother call.

“I want to talk with you about what will happen to your dad and me,” Ava said, searching her daughter’s face for understanding. Although Lily was still in primary school, Ava knew she needed to begin preparing her daughter for what lay ahead.

“The day will come when they ring our doorbell and take Mom and Dad away to prison,” Ava explained. “When they come, don’t worry. The Bible tells us it is normal to be persecuted as believers. They will take us to prison, ask us some questions, and hit us. Then we will come back.”

It took several years, but the day did come. On a winter morning, while Lily was at school, authorities rang Ava’s doorbell and took her and her husband off to prison.

For millions of Christians, Paul’s words ““We are God’s children. If we are children then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings ”” reflect their everyday experience. They live with constant threat of persecution for their faith—the threat of intimidation, isolation, beatings, imprisonment and even death—and they choose to follow Jesus anyway.

It’s a humbling thought, knowing that our brothers and sisters in Christ are willing to suffer for their faith. It’s also a foreign concept for many of us. Persecution? Does that stuff really happen anymore? The short answer: yes—to millions of believers all over the world.

According to the USA Pew Research Center, 75 percent of the world’s population lives in areas with severe religious restrictions—many of whom are Christians.

To break it down. Research from the Open Doors 2021 World Watch List indicates that religious persecution is increasing, with Christians enduring more than any faith group. The statistics are telling:

Every day, one in 8 Christians experiences high, very high, or extreme persecution for following Jesus. That is 340 million Christians.

Every month, approximately 66 churches are attacked, burned or vandalized.

Each day, six Christian women are raped, sexually harassed or forced into marriage.

Every month, 2,800 Christians are forced to leave their home because they believe in Jesus.

VIOLENT VS. SYSTEMATIC

As we open our eyes to persecution, it's easy to focus on the violent events that we see on the news. Violent persecution can take many forms, such as churches being burned or Christians being beaten. But, although thousands of incidents like these occur each year, that's not the most common form of persecution.

More often, Christians experience social pressure and discrimination within their community.

Social persecution could include being kicked out of your family or fired from your job because of your faith.

Social persecution is often quieter than violent persecution and is less likely to make the news, but it can be extremely damaging to its victims.

BIBLE

Although the level of persecution around the world has been on the rise, persecution itself is not new. As long as there have been Christians, there has been persecution. In the Bible, Paul says 'our present sufferings'.

Peter says 'Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.' (1 Peter 4). Christ suffered, so it is with his disciples.

Stott: "For the essence of discipleship is union with Christ and this means identification with him in both his sufferings and his glory."
Stott, Romans,p235.

In fact much of the New Testament has been written by persecuted Christians to persecuted Christians. Have a flick through the letters and see how many references there are. For the NT is a matter not of *if* you are persecuted, it is a question – **when** you will be...

In the countries, reflected in the World Watch List, these Christians expect persecution, to some extent, as they remember the words of Jesus. "*If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also,*" (John 15:20) and

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). For them, with so much on the line, there can be no halfway commitment to Jesus Christ. As Jesus was lifted high on the cross, they are willing to follow Jesus even if means similar sufferings to what he endured... These believers are all in.

The most common prayer request they pass on to visiting Christians is: "Please pray God will give me the strength to be a witness for Christ in the middle of these hardships."

It's humbling to think of Jesus' words in the context of persecuted Christians. All they have to do is remain silent about their faith or simply deny Christ to avoid punishment or suffering—and yet, daily, they choose to deny themselves instead. They hold to the hope of glory in the future, and the love of Christ – Who shall separate us from

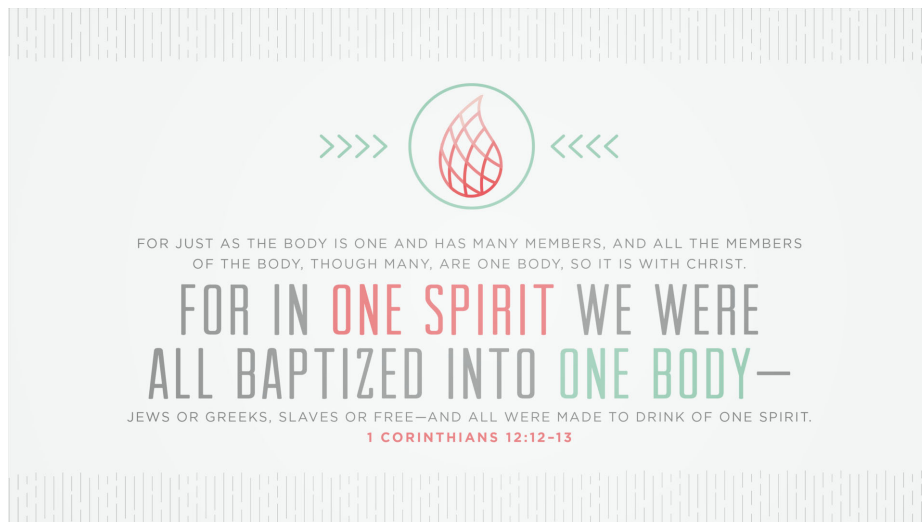
the love of Christ, shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or sword... I am convinced nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

How much more should we be proclaiming Christ with the freedoms we have?

TOGETHER

Another question. How do you think God feels about persecution? What does he expect of us? Pause.

God sees believers as one Body. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” (1 Corinthians 12:12–13a).



In our minds, it’s altogether too easy to divide the Church into those who are suffering for their faith and those who are able to worship freely.

But there is only *one Church*—just *one Body* of believers. We need to remember. There aren't two churches—a persecuted Church and a free Church. There is one Church, with Christ as the head. That means when you talk about the body of believers, you and your persecuted brothers and sisters are one and the same. We are them. They are us. One Church.

God designed the Church to work together in unique and powerful ways. Those who are persecuted need those who are free to stand with them—to pray for and support them. The free desperately needs the persecuted as well. We need to see and learn from those who have stood strong in the midst of suffering, who have counted the cost and deemed Jesus more than worth whatever they might lose.

Paul takes it a step further. In 1 Corinthians 12:26, he writes, “If one member suffers, all suffer together.” Let that sink in for a moment. *If one member suffers, all the members suffer.*



The words of Hebrews 13:3 “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

Have you ever thought about Christian persecution that way? When your fellow believers are suffering, you—as a member of the same Body—suffer with them, mourn with them. You share their grief, mourning the loss of their freedom, their family, their job—whatever the situation might be. You grieve, and you pray.

We see the call in Scripture to suffer with our fellow believers, but it might still feel like a foreign concept. After all, they are people we have never met, and likely never will. Let us think back to our stories at the start. Imagine Abdul was your cousin, being threatened about his faith. Or Hian and Phung were your brothers in that prison. Or Aiva and her husband were your parents, arrested, after warning you. How much more might you pray on their behalf? Wouldn't you be sharing their story with everyone you know, asking them to join you in prayer?

When we pause and reflect, we realize persecuted believers are members of our spiritual family. And they need our support.

Psalms 82:3 shares God's heart for his people “Stand up for those who are weak and for those whose fathers have died. See to it that those who are poor and those who are beaten down are treated fairly.”



STAND

Batima became a Christian as a college student in Central Asia. Not long after, her family invited her home for a visit. She was looking forward to time with her family and could never have guessed what would happen next. When she arrived home, her brothers and sister brutally beat her—determined to make her renounce her new faith in Jesus. But Batima refused. Her siblings beat her so badly, she suffered a concussion and eventually lost consciousness. That’s when they tied her up and took her phone and personal documents.

Somehow, Batima managed to escape. Amazingly, she does not harbor anger toward her siblings—asking instead for prayer that they would come to know Christ.

It’s so easy to slip back into a thought pattern that goes a bit like this: “I realize persecuted Christians like Batima are hurting. But I’ve never met them and probably never will—they are on the other side of the globe. Am I really supposed to care for them? I wouldn’t even know where to start anyway.”

Pretty soon, that thought pattern is playing on “repeat” in your mind, and you’ve all but convinced yourself that Christian persecution was just something you read about once and might think about every now and again, and pray for it every so often.

CALLED TO STAND WITH THE PERSECUTED

We realize that it’s hard to think of things that aren’t part of your daily world. But the simple truth is, God has called us to stand with and support our brothers and sisters.

And while it’s true that much of the persecuted Church is half a world away, hearing their stories can change the way you live here in the Netherlands or whichever land you live currently in.

Realizing that millions of believers count themselves blessed to be found worthy to suffer for the cause of Christ might make *you* take risks you wouldn’t have before. Maybe it’s stepping out in faith and sharing about Jesus with your neighbors. Perhaps it’s choosing to reflect the joy of the Lord in the midst of challenging circumstances. Whatever the situation, God can use these powerful stories about your brothers and sisters to draw *you* closer to Him and help you shine His light in your own community.

How can I make a difference?

Making a difference sounds great, but what does it look like, practically speaking?

Pray. What do you think the number one request from persecuted Christians is? You might be surprised to hear it’s not financial support, or even Christian materials—it’s prayer. The persecuted Church understands the power of prayer, and they desperately need us to stand with them in this way.

Alexander, an Open Doors worker, asked a Cuban pastor what his needs were, expecting the pastor to list the many material needs the churches obviously lacked.

Without skipping a beat, the Cuban pastor replied, “The first thing we need is your prayers. We need to know the Body of Christ is with us.”

Those of you who have been praying through the World Watch List since the Sunday after Easter. You have spent 50 days in prayer – some moments in each day praying for our persecuted brothers and sisters. Awesome. If you have not done it – you could start today and spend the next 50 days praying...

There is the Open Doors app – regular news about how to pray. There are old forms of contact – email! You can sign up with one of the various Open Doors offices - UK, USA, Australia, South Africa, and here in the Netherlands to name but a few!

GIVE

You can give. Giving to Open Doors who then partner with persecuted Christians on the ground, to distribute bibles, rebuild communities, serve refugees, and shelter believers. Twice a year our own monthly charitable giving focuses on Open Doors and its work. Our next giving will be in September.

Remember Batima? Her siblings beat her in an effort to make her renounce her faith. After she escaped, she was able to get connected with Open Doors staff, who provided medical care and a safe house as she healed from her ordeal. That’s what making a difference looks like.

Another example is Amir in Iraq. He and his family weren’t sure if they would survive. ISIS militants forced them from their village and they fled, to the nearest refugee camp. They arrived with no home, no job and no money. Open Doors staff members were able to connect with Amir and provide him with microloans he could use to open a shop in

the refugee camp. A source of income for his family and a shop that helped others in the camp. That's what making a difference looks like.

Speak.

To write to believers. The website will have ways and advice how to do this.

To contact your Parliament or local MP, to raise their awareness of current issues for persecuted Christians. When Open Doors launches the World Watch List they are keen to engage with the various MPS in the UK, especially those who are Christians – for this can influence government policy.

Go. Visit. Before Corona, Open Doors organized a number of overseas trips to allow Christians to meet with believers in these difficult lands. You may ask. Well, isn't it better if I give my money than to go. Money is important in your support. But I was told before my trip – to simply come, to visit, to meet, to pray – it says they are not forgotten, that they are so valued you have come to see them, that the wider body of Christ has not forgotten. I received greatly on my visit. But it was a visit which encouraged the believers.

Or like Isaiah, does God invite you to go. To become involved full time in the work of supporting persecuted Christians?

Conclusion.

Psalm 46:10 says, "Be still, and know that I am God." It's not a suggestion; it's a command to slow down, to stop doing and simply *be* before the Lord. When we quiet ourselves before the Lord, we resume a right focus, with our hearts and minds set on Him. When we stop talking and doing, we can hear Him and what He has to say to us.

This simple act of slowing down is crucial when it comes to understanding how to respond to the persecuted Church. We often

hear about people in need and rush to help—and we *should* help. But sometimes our first instinct isn't actually the most helpful.

When we dive in without seeking God first, we miss the opportunity to pray for and hear what His plan is for our lives. We recall, Jesus, a man of prayer modeled to us, who said I only do what I see the Father doing...

We seek his plan. And we desire to yield to it, to say yes to it. It takes courage to yield to the Lord—courage to be still, courage to wait on Him and courage to surrender to His plan.

Take time. Be still. Ask the Lord, what He may be asking you to do for the persecuted Church?

Prayer at the end...

Lord, as I think of the millions of Christians around the world who are suffering for their faith. I confess that, at times, my heart has not cared about their pain.

Would You help me to see through Your eyes? Help me to love them as You do. Place in me a burden for my brothers and sisters who are hurting.

I ask even now that You would watch over them— sustain and encourage them. Give them what they need to withstand these storms.

Lord, would you show me how You would have me help the persecuted Church? I know I have so much to learn from them.

Help me to bless them, support them and stand with them—even if it means breaking out of my comfort zone to do so.

Amen.

Thanks to Open Doors for the stories and resources...

www.opendoorsusa.org

<https://rippleeffectseries.com/>