

Persecution

There have been recent reports of severe Christian persecution taking place in Africa, specifically in the country of Nigeria. In recent days, months, and years, over 50,000 Christians have been targeted and killed. Recently news headlines have read, *"48 more Christians slaughtered in Nigeria, hundreds of homes destroyed."* Another, *"Christian persecution in Nigeria: 1,200 churches destroyed annually,"* or, *"Nigeria – report shows 100 churches are attacked every month."* One headline reads, *"As Christians are slaughtered, the world looks away."* Frequent reports note that there are two groups claiming primary responsibility for the persecution in Nigeria since 2009, the Islamic terrorist groups known as Boko Haram (a self-proclaimed Islamic jihadist militant group based in northeastern Nigeria) and the terrorist group known as ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province). One thing we can be sure of is that the Christian church will continue to experience various levels of persecution as Jesus Himself prophesied that these things can be expected, ***"You will be hated by all because of My name,"*** Matthew 10:22, and in John 15:18, ***"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you."*** Jesus of course is saying these things to His disciples.

Many websites and news outlets report that Christians continue to be the most persecuted people group on earth. Every 2 hours a Christian is killed for his/her faith. One in seven Christians worldwide experience high levels of persecution. One in five Christians are persecuted in Africa. Two in five Christians are persecuted in Asia. According to the "World Watch List," the five countries with the highest amount of Christian persecution are (5) Sudan (4) Libya (3) Yemen (2) Somalia, and (1) North Korea. I'm not sure where Nigeria falls into that list as of recent events.

Faithful Christians will absolutely experience some measure of persecution. When a believer's faith compels him to take risks socially, financially, or relationally, and he chooses to live with conviction, moral excellence, and faith that shines into all spheres of his life, then he will experience at least some degree of persecution. I know this because the Word of God says as much. 2 Timothy 3:12, ***"Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."*** In the United States, a Christian may not experience death, torture, or imprisonment for their faith, but they might experience a persecution of words or being ignored or shunned.

Jesus said in John 15:20, ***"If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."*** If a Christian says that he has never experienced any type of persecution, no matter how slight, that's likely a sign that his faith isn't very pronounced. For example, I recall a conversation with a friend who told me that he worked alongside a coworker for ten years before discovering they were both Christians. That's the kind of person who says, *"Well, I've been a Christian most of my life and I've never experienced any persecution for my faith."* No kidding. This kind of Christian won't experience persecution, and likewise won't experience any sort of ministry fruit either.

Blending into society is one thing, but others not being able to experience your faith is something else. Too many Christians are not making a difference. They're not living a life of self-denial that comes with faithful obedience. A Christian ought to say, *"No, I haven't seen that show,"* or, *"No, I haven't slept with my girlfriend,"* or, *"No, I haven't tried that drug,"* or *"No, I haven't cheated on my taxes."* I could go on and on, but a Christian should be able to demonstrate self-denial and then provide a faith-filled answer when others ask, *"Why haven't you?"* Matthew 5:16 says, ***"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."*** Some will experience your faith and as a result, choose to glorify the Lord. Others will experience your faith and will persecute you. No matter what, let your faith be made known. 1 Peter 3:14-15, ***"But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness,"***

you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you."

The Christian that is living out his faith is called a "witness" in the Bible. The Greek word for this is *martus*, from which we get the known word *martyr*. Commonly, the word *martyr* is generally thought of as one who dies for his faith. However, to be a martyr doesn't require death, but only that one lives as a witness for the Lord. For example, Hebrews 11 is a chapter often referred to as the "faith hall of fame," as it goes through a significant list of great heroes of the faith from Abel, Noah, Abraham, Rahab, Gideon, Samson and more. Following the list, Hebrews 12:1 says, ***"Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses..."*** The list of witnesses in Hebrews 11 wasn't a list of people who died for their faith, but a list of people who lived out their faith. Though a witness for Jesus may suffer severe persecution, possibly unto death, one is a martyr when he's willing to take a risk in his daily living to make his faith shine.

Consider the testimony of Richard Wurmbrand, founder of a ministry called Voice of the Martyrs. Wurmbrand grew up in Romania, as an ethnic Jew, whose belief system was atheism (the belief that there is no God). Wurmbrand admitted that atheism left him empty, troubled, and without any peace in his heart. Through God's intervention in his life, Wurmbrand eventually came to faith in Jesus. Soon, Wurmbrand's faith would be tested. In the autumn of 1944, the Russian Communist regime invaded Romania with a million troops. As Russia pressed communism onto the people of Romania, many church and government leaders were being seduced by the lies of communism, lies such that communism and Christianity were fundamentally the same. At a rally where communism was being preached, Wurmbrand spoke out about the reality of Jesus Christ and the false teachings of the communist party. For this he was arrested. Many Christians who dared speak out for their faith suffered as Wurmbrand did.

In his autobiography, *Tortured for Christ*, Wurmbrand describes details of the persecution that he and others experienced. Wurmbrand mentions a pastor who was tortured severely. In between beatings, this pastor was brutalized with red hot iron pokers and knives. The same man had rats intentionally driven into his cell through a large pipe. Wurmbrand writes that the pastor, *"could not sleep because he had to defend himself all the time. If he rested a moment, the rats would attack."* Later, this pastor was forced to stand, unable to sit at all, and only offered the relief of bending his knees to sit if only he would betray other Christians. This was an endurance torture which actually lasted for two weeks, day and night. The pastor stood, continuously, unable to sit down even once. Eventually, the communists brought in his fourteen-year-old son and began to whip him in order to prompt the father to give up his Christian friends. His own son cried out to his father to stand with Jesus and not give in. At the boy's own profession of faith, the enraged communist torturers quickly jumped on the boy and beat him to death. The father watched in horror. Though the pastor never compromised his faith, Wurmbrand said that the boy's father was never the same after witnessing his son's death.

In other accounts, Wurmbrand spoke of thick handcuffs with razor sharp nails on the inside of the cuff. As they shivered in their cells, their wrists bled as the cuts deepened. Any movement at all resulted in their wrists being torn up. Other Christians were hung upside down by ropes and *"beaten so severely that their bodies swung back and forth under the blows."* Christians were placed in ice-box "refrigerator cells" which were so cold that ice coated the insides. Wurmbrand was placed in one of these refrigerator cells with very little clothes on. He recalls that *"prison doctors would watch through an opening until they saw symptoms of*

freezing to death, then they would give a signal and guards would rush in to take us out and make us warm. When we were finally warm, we would immediately be put back into the ice-box cells to freeze again."

Sometimes Christians were "forced to stand in wooden boxes only slightly larger than we were. This left no room to move. Dozens of sharp nails were driven into every side of the box, with their razor-sharp points sticking through the wood. While we stood perfectly still it was all right. But we were forced to stand in these boxes for endless hours; when we became fatigued and swayed with tiredness, the nails would pierce our bodies. If we moved or twitched a muscle – there were the horrible nails."

Tortures of pain were only some of what Wurmbrand and others experienced. Psychological torture was also commonly brought upon Christians. Some were tied to wooden crosses which were then laid on the floor, *"for four days and nights they were tied to these crosses, and hundreds of prisoners had to fulfill their bodily necessities"* over the faces of those tied to the cross. After four days the crosses were stood up and the communists mocked, *"Look at your Christ! How beautiful he is! What fragrance he brings from heaven!"* Another inmate who was a minister was forced to consecrate human excrement and urine, and then had to feed these to other Christians as a mock holy communion.

Wurmbrand wrote that the tortures and brutality *"continued without interruption. When I lost consciousness or became too dazed to give the torturers any further hope of denouncing my faith, I would be returned to my cell. There I would lie unattended and half dead, to regain a little strength so they could work on me again. Many died in this stage, but somehow my strength always managed to return. In the ensuing years, in several different prisons, they broke four vertebrae in my back, and many other bones. They carved me in a dozen places. They burned and cut eighteen holes in my body. In solitary confinement, we could not pray as before. We were unimaginably hungry; we had been drugged until we acted like idiots. We were as weak as skeletons. The 'Lord's Prayer' was much too long for us – we could not concentrate enough to say it. My only prayer was to repeat again and again, 'Jesus, I love you!'"*

Wurmbrand writes that he and other Christians were strictly forbidden from preaching to other inmates. Whoever was caught doing so would receive a severe beating. *"A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their terms. It was a deal: we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching; they were happy beating us – so everyone was happy. The following scene happened more times than I can remember. A brother was preaching to the other prisoners when the guards suddenly burst in. They hauled him down to the beating room. After what seemed like an endless beating, they brought him back and threw him, bloody and bruised, on the prison floor. Slowly, he picked up his battered body and said, 'Now, brethren, were did I leave off?' He continued his gospel message!"*

Wurmbrand spoke of the lessons that he and other Christians had learned from the torture. One lesson in particular was that *"the spirit is master over the body."* He writes, *"When we were given one slice of bread a week, and dirty soup every day, we decided that we would faithfully 'tithe' even then. Every tenth week we took the slice of bread and gave it to a weaker brother as our 'tithe' to the Master."*

Wurmbrand spoke of the satanic heart of his torturers. They had proclaimed, *"There is no God, no hereafter, no punishment for evil. We can do what we wish."* One said, *"I thank God, in whom I don't believe, that I have lived to this hour when I can express all the evil in my heart."* Wurmbrand writes, *"I learned from them. As*

they allowed no place for Jesus in their heart, I decided I would leave not the smallest place for Satan in mine." That's the resolve of a man that can only be known by Jesus and filled with the Holy Spirit!

Wurmbrand notes that when a Christian was sentenced to death, he was allowed to speak to his wife one final time. One man, before his execution, said to his wife, *"You must know that I die loving those who kill me. They don't know what they do, and my last request of you is to love them too."* These words impressed one of the communist officers so much that he himself entrusted his life to Jesus Christ. Wurmbrand only knows this because he was later imprisoned with this very officer, who became one of the tortured.

Wurmbrand spent a total of fourteen years in prison for his faith, much of his time under intense duress and torture. He wrote, *"If a poor man is a great lover of music, he gives his last dollar to listen to a concert. He is then without money, but he does not feel frustrated. He has heard beautiful things. I don't feel frustrated to have lost many years in prison. I have seen beautiful things. I myself have been among the weak and insignificant ones in prison, but have had the privilege to be in the same jail with great saints, heroes of faith who equaled the Christians of the first centuries. They went gladly to do for Christ. The spiritual beauty of such saints and heroes of faith can never be described."*

After World War two had ended, many of the communist torturers themselves were sent to prison. Many years later, in 1965, Wurmbrand would move out of Romania. He writes, *"My last deed before leaving was to go to the grave of the colonel who had given the order for my arrest and who had ordered my years of torture. I placed a flower on his grave. By doing this I dedicated myself to bringing the joys of Christ that I have to the communists who are so empty spiritually."*

You can clearly see the heart of Jesus in Richard Wurmbrand. Jesus said, ***"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,"*** Matthew 5:44.

What Can I Do?

Around the world today there are Christian churches that are being burned and Christians being hunted in order to be killed or imprisoned. The author of Hebrews implores us to pray for those who are persecuted, whether they are in prison or being abused, pray as though we are with them! Hebrews 13:3, ***"Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body."*** To ***"remember the prisoners...and ill-treated"*** is not simply to pause and reflect on their distress. To remember is a call to prayer and action. It's a command to identify with them, to feel for them in the way you would want others to feel for you if you were persecuted to such a degree. Pray earnestly, with fervor, believing that your prayers are helping to sustain them and fuel their faith. Afterall, all Christians are susceptible to a similar persecution. Pray as though you are with them!

Pray for world leaders, as the Scriptures command us to in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, ***"First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity."*** As leaders turn in faith to Jesus, so do those whom they lead. Wurmbrand writes, *"How was Norway won for Christ? By winning King Olaf. Russia first had the gospel when its king, Vladimir, was won. Hungary was won by winning St. Stephen, its king. The same with Poland. In Africa, where the chief of the tribe has been won, the tribe follows. We must win rulers, leaders in politics, economics, science and the arts. They mold the souls of men."*

Aside from much needed prayer, there are other tangible ways Christians can support the persecuted church. Sending financial aid and other forms of relief make a huge impact. Additionally, Bibles are urgently needed. Ministries like Wycliff work exhaustively to get Bibles translated into every known language. In countries where Bibles are scarce, Christians in the United States can have Bibles sent. In countries where Bibles are illegal, Christians can smuggle them in and some are doing even today.

Wurmbrand writes the following, after he was freed from his imprisonment. *“Two very dirty villagers came to my home one day to buy a Bible. They had come from their village to take the job of shoveling the frozen earth all winter long to earn money in the slight hope they might be able to buy an old, tattered Bible and take it back to their village. Because I had received Bibles from America, I was able to hand them a new Bible, not an old tattered one. They could not believe their eyes! They tried to pay me with the money they had earned. I refused their money. They rushed back to their village with the Bible. A few days later I received a letter of unrestrained ecstatic joy thanking me for the Scriptures. It was signed by thirty villagers! They had carefully cut the Bible into thirty parts and exchanged the parts with one another.”* He continued, *“It was pathetic to hear a Russian begging for one page of the Bible to feed his soul. They were happy to exchange a cow or a goat for a Bible. One man traded his wedding ring for a battered New Testament.”*



Conclusion

Each one of us, having read a bit of Richard Wurmbrand's testimony, has asked ourselves, *“Would I be able to maintain my faith amidst such horrible torture?”* I hope I never have to face that reality. I'm encouraged to read what Peter writes to the persecuted church in his Biblical letter 1 Peter 4:12-14, ***“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.”***

Several things need to be drawn out from these verses. First, persecution is to be expected for believers who live for Jesus. They ought not to be ***“surprised...as though some strange thing were happening.”*** God allows the Christian to undergo persecution for the purpose of testing the saints and building the kingdom here on

earth. Secondly, when/if a Christian is undergoing a ***“fiery ordeal,”*** which is to ***“share the suffering of Christ,”*** the believer is to keep on rejoicing, because while he is being ***“reviled for the name of Christ,”*** the ***“Spirit of glory and of God rest on you.”*** This means that God will pour out a measure of grace in order to sustain you amidst your suffering. A portion of grace ***“to the degree that you share in the sufferings of Christ.”*** The more one is tortured for Christ, the more grace is given to sustain him. Consider Stephen at his stoning. While rocks battered his body, the grace and glory of the Lord was poured out on him and a window to heaven opened up where Stephen could fix his eyes on Jesus in order to sustain him while he was being killed, Acts 7:58-60.

Wurmbrand writes, *“To be in prison for fourteen years is a long period to us. The Bible calls it **“momentary,”** and tells us that, **“momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal,”** 2 Corinthians 4:17-18.*

Pray for the persecuted church, ***“as though with them.”*** Pray for your strength to live a life of faithful obedience that makes an impact on the world.