

July 1, 2018
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Communion
Community Baptist Church
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AS THOUGH IN PRISON Hebrews 13:3

In January this year, *the Jerusalem Post* reported that 1 in 12 Christians are being persecuted worldwide. That amounts to about 215 million Christians who are facing some kind of persecution for their faith. Obviously, the majority of those people live in Islamic nations. However, for the sixteenth year in a row, North Korea is listed as the worse persecutor of Christians.

The World Wide Watch list, a list that identifies Christian persecution around the world, has been published for the past twenty-five years. That research reveals that for 2018, persecution against Christians has set a record high for the third year in a row.

What constitutes persecution? Open Doors, who publishes the list, explains persecution as: “The pressures faced by Christians in five spheres of life (private, family, community, national, and church), plus levels of religiously motivated violence, in order to rank the top 50 countries where ‘Christians face the most persecution.’” The level of persecution has also increased with more countries participating in religious killing. Pakistan is the most violent culture against Christians, and killings in Nigeria increased by 62%. And hitting closer to home, over the past year and half, 23 church leaders were killed in Mexico, and four believers were killed in Columbia because of their faith.

It is well known that many Christian pastors, evangelists, and laymen are incarcerated today because of their witness in countries such as Burma, China, Eritrea, North Korea, Pakistan and Vietnam. North Korea alone is estimated to have 70,000 Christians locked away in concentration camps.

What can we do about it? Should we do anything? Can we do anything? You know that we pray for persecuted Christians virtually every Sunday morning. We advertise their fate on the scrolling announcements Sunday morning and evening. We encourage believers to pray for their fellow Christians who suffer so much.

While it is true that persecution against Christians is said to be at an all-time high, it is also true that such persecution is nothing new. The person who wrote to the Hebrew Christians in the book we call *Hebrews* challenged Christians to remember fellow believers who were in prison and who were being mistreated. That was around the year A.D. 65. We also know that from that point on, beginning especially with Emperor Nero, persecution by the Romans against Christians increased dramatically. Therefore, whatever instruction was good for Christians regarding imprisoned and persecuted believers then is good instruction still. What should we do? *Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body (Hebrews 13:3).*

Remember those who are in prison.

Inspired by God, the writer tells us to *Remember those who are in prison*. The command causes us to wonder who is in prison. Considering a modern-day application of the principle, we would immediately conclude that criminals who have broken the law are in prison. In fact, there are 2,298,300 people incarcerated in the U.S. That figures out to about 1 out of every 130 people (citizens and non-citizens) in America are imprisoned. And that is a fraction of the number of people who have broken or continue to break the law.

I’m not going to feel too sorry for the incarcerated who are criminals, because God ordained that governing authorities should punish law breakers. His law is: *But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer (Romans 13:4b)*. Now it is also true that many incarcerated people come to grips with their sinfulness while in prison and become born again. We have people in our body here who minister to these people regularly.

That is a good ministry, a good thing to do. However, the text really does not refer to those people.

The people in prison, in the context of this letter, were Christians who have broken the law. We must conclude that they were Christians because the writer makes them equivalent to those who are mistreated. And at the end of the verse, we discover that they are members of the Body of Christ in which all Christians share. Okay, so what kind of Christians were guilty of breaking the law?

By the time God authored this letter, Christians were already facing persecution. In fact, persecution against the Body of Christ began with the Jewish religious rulers beating and imprisoning Peter, James, and John immediately after the Holy Spirit began the Church. Also in those early days, Herod killed James. Saul of Tarsus inspired widespread persecution and imprisonment of Christians. One year before the writing of this book “Hebrews,” Nero began the Roman government persecution of Christians that lasted nearly 300 years.

But they weren’t criminals as we think of criminals. No, but we must bear in mind that during the early years of the Church, the Jewish leaders accused Christians of breaking “the Law” of Moses and deemed they should be punished. Within thirty years of the Church’s beginning, Roman Emperors accused the believers of breaking the laws imposed by them (in particular Caesar worship).

So, what are we to do with or for those people who are in prison for their faith? The text challenges us to intercede with God on their behalf. Specifically, we are to remember them. To remember typically means to recall information. Here the idea is for us to regularly, continually call to mind the plight of our fellow believers who are in prison. Implied in the remembrance is the need to pray to God in behalf of those who are in prison.

Paul specifically asked the recipients of his letters to pray for him while he was in prison. To the Philippian Christians he wrote, *For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance (Philippians 1:19)*. He wrote from the same prison to ask Philemon, *At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you (Philemon 1:22)*. Such may also be the request of the writer of this letter where the writer wrote, *Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring*

to act honorably in all things. I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner (Hebrews 13:18-19).

Second, while we call to mind the brothers and sisters who are in prison, maybe we could go so far as to try to intercede with authorities in their behalf. That is the kind of thing Paul did when he appealed to Caesar in order to escape persecution from the Jews. It is the kind of thing various groups do who appeal to Congressmen, the President, and even the United Nations. It is part of the work John Hucheson does as he presses officials in Washington. We need to remind our governing officials that God ordained them to “do good.” Or as Paul put it, *For he is God’s servant for your good (Romans 13:4a)*.

While we intercede with God and man in behalf of imprisoned Christians, we also need to be sympathetic with them. The writer told us to think about the Christians, *as though in prison with them*. Or to state the Greek text very literally, call the imprisoned to mind “*as though having been bound with them*.” We really cannot imagine the horrors and physical suffering our brothers and sisters endure. Pray as though you are confined to the same cell with the people of God.

Remember Those Who are Mistreated.

Remember those who are in prison . . . and those who are mistreated. Again we are caused to wonder who is mistreated. Christians who live in non-Christian cultures are mistreated. From reports gathered by concerned groups, we know that mistreatment includes things like rejection by families, physical beatings, loss of jobs, homes vandalized or burned, and church buildings vandalized or burned. These atrocities are not leveled against Christians because they are bad citizens. In fact, they are (or should be) among the most model citizens. They are mistreated because they love Jesus.

Now this sad reality also applies to Christians who live in “formerly Christian” America. I can remember a day when the Christian ideology was respected like it had been since it was introduced to this nation in 1620. To people of my boyhood years, church was important. The Bible was appealed to as the standard of right, sworn upon by Presidents entering office, and witnesses were

required to swear upon it to tell the truth in court. Pastors were the most respected professionals in the community. Christians were looked up to by those who wished they could live like a Christian.

Things changed quickly in the mid-1960s. Now Christians are sued for taking a stand on Bible truth and Christian ideology. Bible truths are not allowed to be represented in the courtroom, the public square, or schools. Christians are fired, rejected by families, mocked and persecuted out of the public forum. We know Christians who endure such mistreatment in this culture and in foreign cultures.

Again we are forced to ask, “What are we to do?” And again we need to intercede with God. Like we do for the imprisoned Christians, we are to “remember those who are mistreated.” That includes praying for each other. But it can also include providing assistance. Such assistance might be counseling the victim to possibly correct the reason for mistreatment. By that we mean that it is possible for a Christian to be acting unwisely which brings mistreatment for foolishness as well as for Christian testimony. At other times, we might be able to actually help or intercede in the matters of mistreatment. By all means we need to encourage the mistreated brother and sister.

Remember Because we are Body Members Together.

We remember those who are in prison and those who are mistreated, because we also are in the body. We are in the same body with other Christians who Jesus purchased with His blood. They are all saved the same way we are. Christian victims of mistreatment and imprisonment are recipients of the miracle of regeneration just like we are. They are born again by God’s grace, chosen before the foundation of the earth. God Himself placed them in the Body of Christ.

Therefore, the people whom God placed in the Body are uniquely valuable. Like us, they are part of Christ’s body at the price of Christ’s blood. They are the Good Shepherd’s lambs. They are fellow body members. They impact the Body function universally. Like the body pictures in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. When one member suffers, we all suffer (1 Corinthians 12:26).

And because we are in the Body of Christ together, we all work together in unity. *But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:24b-25).*

Ancient writers who observed the early Church acknowledged this unity. Tertullian, an early Christian apologist, wrote, “If there happen to be any in the mines, banished to the islands, or shut up in prisons, the Christians become carriers of their confession.” Aristodes, the pagan orator, said of the Christians, “If they hear that any one of their number is in prison or in distress for the sake of their Christ’s name, they all render aid in his necessity, and if they can, they redeem him, to set him free.” In other words, if he was in jail, they would pay his fine or redemption price. The Apostolic Confession said, “If any Christian is condemned for Christ’s sake to the mines by the ungodly, do not overlook him, but from the proceeds of your toil and sweat, send him something to support himself, and to reward the soldier of Christ. All money accruing from honest labor do you appoint and apportion to the redeeming of the saints, ransoming thereby slaves and captives and prisoners, people who are sore abused, and condemned by tyrants.” Some early Christians sold themselves into slavery to get money to free a fellow believer. (*MacArthur N.T. Commentary, Hebrews, p.428*).

How closely does that describe our response to imprisoned and mistreated brothers and sisters. It is not that we don’t know any of them. We do. Let’s review a handful of cases where we know Christians are persecuted.

Real Life Applications

North Korea will not tolerate any worship that rivals that of the “Great Leader,” Kim Jong-un. As an example of the pervasive religious oppression, school children are rewarded for going on a “treasure hunt” at home to look for Bibles and reporting their finds to their teachers. If found guilty, the parents are sent to a concentration camp. An estimated 70,000 Korean Christians endure brutal torture in slave labor camps. A Christian Korean-American, Kim Hak Song, is a visiting university instructor who was arrested on May 6, 2017,

on the false charges of “hostile acts against the government.” Professor Kim had previously written, “I’ve committed to devoting my last drop of blood to this work.” Christians worldwide prayed and Kim Hak Song was released recently as part of President Trump’s meeting with Kim Jong-un.

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, is one of several countries most hostile to Christians. The Saudis practice Wahhabism, the strictest form of Islam. Officially, every Saudi citizen is considered a Muslim, and those who become followers of Christ are subject to the death penalty. Approximately 4% of the population is Christian—most of whom are foreign workers who worship in underground church. The government employs thousands of religious police to enforce strict Islamic laws, including raiding house churches. However, Saudis are turning to Christ at great risk of severe persecution from both family and government authorities. Many learn of Jesus on the Internet, and when they come to saving faith, they know no other Christians. Their only source of fellowship is online. Intercede with God for grace for believers who follow Christ in this radical Muslim nation.

In Laos, one of the few communist nations left in the world, Christians comprise only about 3% of the population. Laotian believers (most of whom abandon Buddhism or animism in order to follow Jesus) suffer great harassment and rejection from both their families and the government. Pastor Shu fled his village after a relative who was angry at the Gospel message attempted to murder him. Two older teenage girls, Nani and Nha Phong, were tied up for four days by their father for professing Christ and rejecting animism. After releasing them, their father continued to pressure them to return to animism. They were later arrested but were able to escape to another village. Pray that our Laotian brothers and sisters will glorify God in their sufferings as they are persecuted for Christ’s sake.

Andrew Brunson, who is from North Carolina, served as a pastor in Turkey for 23 years, most recently at Izmir Resurrection Church. In October of 2016, he was arrested on the false charge of membership in a terrorist organization. The majority of Pastor Andrew’s time in prison has been spent in isolation at a maximum security facility. Pastor Andrew’s last trial was on May 7, at which time the Turkish government sent him back to prison, scheduling

another trial for July 18. The government still intends to press for a life sentence, falsely accusing Brunson of participating with a “terrorist organization.”

Continue to intercede for God to give grace and boldness to Pastor Andrew so that God will be glorified at the trial. He wrote, "I am in prison not for anything I have done wrong, but because of who I am – a Christian pastor. . . . Yet I believe this to be true: it is an honor to suffer for Jesus Christ, as many have before me."

The government of Somalia claims that all Somalis are Muslim because its constitution makes Sunni Islam the state religion. The radical Islamic terrorist group Al Shabaab is waging a campaign against Somalis who are secret Christians, executing them by beheading. In addition, just being a Christian woman invites abuse. One report documents that daily six women are raped or forced into arranged marriages because of their faith. We must pray for gospel light to shine in Somalia and for Christians, isolated and in great need of fellowship and discipleship, to persevere in following Jesus.

The Muslim nation of Tajikistan has recently amended its religion law to assert total control over all religious matters. Churches must fill out detailed questionnaires about their activities and also include a list of the foreign organizations from which they receive funding. Cameras are to be installed in churches, so the government can monitor the people and the preaching. In July of 2017, Bakhrom Khomatov, a 42-year-old Protestant pastor, was sentenced to three years in prison for allegedly “singing extremist songs in church” and inciting “religious hatred.” The secret police also designated his Christian books as “extremist material” and disbanded the church. Khomatov’s wife, Gulnora, has suffered health issues since her husband’s arrest. We can pray for God’s special grace for Pastor Khomatov and Gulnora so that they will shine as lights for Christ in the darkness.

Satan still hates God. Satan hates the truth of the gospel because it is God’s great glory to save sinners. Satan has a free hand to influence people in most of the world. We have God’s command, grace, and power to counteract Satan’s wicked schemes in this world. Pray for those who are imprisoned and mistreated as though we were there with them.