

Text: Hebrews 13:3

My purpose for this message: To challenge Christians to pray for their persecuted brothers and sisters.

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From the Land of the Free, For the Home of the Brave

PRAY.

Today is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And to begin, we're going to hear from some of our brothers and sisters who just came back from Vietnam, where Christians *are* persecuted because of their faith. Doug?

We sing that we live in the land of the Free, but when it comes to being courageous Christians, we cannot deny that the Home of the Brave is located not here, but in other parts of the world like North Korea, Cuba, Sudan, Nigeria, Laos, Indonesia, Turkmenistan, Columbia, China and Iran; these are places where Christians suffer just for being Christians.

Zivar Khademian and her husband lived in Tehran, Iran. Like most Iranians, they were practicing Muslims. They had 3 sons, Hossein, Kazem, and the eldest son Faheem who later emigrated to Canada. And they had a young daughter Fatemeh, whom her father had promised in marriage to a much older cousin once she came of age. The cousin was a member of the Islamic Militia, a volunteer force that ensures strict compliance with Islamic law.

Sometime after Zivar's husband died, she and her children learned that Faheem had become a Christian. In phone calls from British Columbia he urged his family to begin reading the NT. They did and several years ago, mother and daughter were converted and baptized in Tehran.

After admitting this to Fatemeh's brothers, the young men began to accompany the women to underground church meetings. In May, 2002, authorities arrested Kazem on some charges and sentenced him to 6 months in jail. Authorities raided his home, finding Christian literature and cassettes the family had been duplicating.

During his 6 months in prison, Kazem's brother Hossein went into hiding, and his mother and sister endured constant police surveillance. Upon his release, things became intolerable and after selling their car, the Khademian family bought a black market passport for Kazem. And on the night of January 11, 2003, the entire family slipped across the border into Turkey.

Unfortunately the UN office in Ankara denied their application for religious refugee status. They appealed and on October 28, 2004 while awaiting the outcome of their appeal, Iran's Supreme Court issued a warrant for Mrs. Khademian's arrest. The charge was under Islamic statute #471: apostasy, abandoning Islam.

Like murder, apostasy is a capital offense in Iran. If she returns, she faces the death penalty. Her daughter will likely be forcibly married to a man 16 years her senior who has dedicated himself to enforcing Islamic law and tormenting Christians like Fatemeh. Her sons will at least face imprisonment. Despite these dangers to them, in February the UN denied her appeal for refugee status and closed the books on her case. When her son's Canadian church appealed to the Turkish government, promising the family if they immigrated, the family was given a 6-month reprieve. But last month, Turkish authorities gave her until October 20 to return to Iran, or be forcibly returned. Time's up. However 2 ½ weeks ago an unknown high-ranking US government official intervened and the Turkish government agreed to keep the family until arrangements for the family's freedom can be made somewhere else. (Pitts?)

Pressure, persecution, prison, murder, rape, mutilation, you name it, these sorts of things happen 10,000 times in 10,000 ways in 10,000 places. Like the Khademians, some Christians flee their homeland only to wander the globe looking for a friendly country to grant them refugee status. Some converts get fired from jobs, or can't get them in the first place if they're known Christians, or families disown them after conversion and refuse to ever speak to them again. Young Christian women are raped as punishment and defilement—sometimes even arranged for by ashamed family members. Sudanese Christians are carried off as slaves and maimed with machetes for daring to name the name of Christ. Churches are attacked and burned. And for the truly obstinate, prisons are waiting.

And yet, people and ministries that help and work with the suffering church tell us over and over that in general, these suffering saints are not only resilient, but joyful. Several years ago in Saigon I asked a couple of underground church pastors how we should pray for them. "Pray that we will remain faithful; pray that our young people would be on fire for the Lord." Surprisingly, neither asked that we pray their suffering end.

In fact, several months ago a prominent Baptist interviewed a key leader in the underground church in China. He asked, "How should we in the west pray for you?" The Chinese leader's words were startling: "Stop praying for persecution in China to end. It is through persecution that the church has grown." And then he added, "We, in fact, are praying that the American church might taste the same persecution so revival would come to the American church like we have seen in China."

I do believe that pressure is coming to us, but until it does and as long as we enjoy the great freedoms we now do, what—if anything—should we do about these suffering relatives of ours? READ Hebrews 13:3. Remember them. This writer is not just saying, "Make sure their situation cruises through your gray matter once a week." For example, when the Scriptures mention *God* doing this kind of remembering, it is a creative event: in Acts 10 God remembered the prayers that General Cornelius had prayed and the money he had given to the poor. *Because* of remembering, God set out to save him. The dying thief asked Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." In other words, remember me and make a place for me.

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. May this become more personal to me, and as it does, I will pray for them. Most of us can't go to them and help them on the ground, but we can pray for them.

You say, "But they're so far away. China's 11,000 miles. Saudi Arabia's 8000 miles. Cuba's just 90 miles from Miami but with the tensions between our two countries it might as well be 9000 miles away.

But we can pray for them. God can go anywhere we ask Him to go by prayer, He can do beyond what we can think or imagine. To go to Tehran, is nothing for Him. To snatch away from death, a Coptic Christian in Egypt, is nothing for Him. Pray for them.

And not primarily for their suffering to end. Most of these faithful stalwarts neither want—nor need—pity. They study how to suffer like you study how to be a godly parent. They know the Scriptures on suffering like you the Scriptures on God's love. And they *realize*, that God has given them the privilege of having their faith purified (1 Pet. 1:6-7). Secondly, they believe they are on a mission. And when you're on a mission, you need prayer. READ Ephesians 6:19-20. Paul was not in jail because God was punishing Him. He'd been sent there on a mission for God. READ Phil. 1:12-

14, 16. Suffering for Jesus is not some form of divine punishment, it is a form of divine invasion. And when we intercede for these dear people, we become part of their invasion force, doing the work of Christ, advancing the Kingdom of Christ, for the glory of Christ.

Make no mistake, in many countries where Christianity is a minority religion and opposed, a Christian that keeps a low profile may well escape opposition. If there's no evangelism, there's no problem. It's carrying out God's *mission* that escalates the troubles.

Last Sunday when we were gathered here in our comfortable church building with plenty of space (compared to most of the world) and in complete peace, worshiping and praising God, there was a prayer meeting taking place on the other side of the globe in India. The meeting was being held in the Uttar Pradesh state which has a population of about 166 million people, just over half of the entire population of the USA. Only about 230,000 of those are Christians.

200 of them were crammed into a Christian home last Sunday praying and worshiping when about 160 Hindu extremists surrounded the house and threatened to kill family members if any "Hindus" were ever seen again at such meetings. Apparently there were some converts from Hinduism, or some soon-to-be converts. The local police have promised the believers (faithers) protection but India is too volatile right now to expect the authorities will carry out their promise with much enthusiasm.

Concl:

Our Keystone Intercessors' Council (affectionately known as KIC) has made arrangements to help you pray intelligently for persecuted Christians. At the Ministry Center, you will find KIC representatives manning a table in the lobby; at the Gate, it will be off to one side.

On the tables you'll find copies of the story of the Iranian family that I told you about earlier. Except it doesn't have the latest update of the US-instigated reprieve. You'll also find riveting magazines and newsletters from ministries that serve the persecuted church: Voice of the Martyrs, International Christian Concern. Take them along to read.

You can also sign up to regularly receive their literature free of charge. These materials will not only open your eyes to how incredibly easy we have it, but give you specifics on how to pray. You may want to begin supporting one of these ministries, or make specific family contributions like money to buy bicycles for evangelists, or cassette recorders, or help support the widows of men who were killed for serving Christ.

With tools like these, you and your family can begin to be part of God's invading force, praying for those who are taking the kingdom of Jesus Christ to their part of the world. *Remember—and pray for—those who are in prison...*

Let me close with a heartwarming story out of China, that demonstrates how a life of suffering for Jesus has become a heritage for the children.

Although China allows "belief" in a religion, the constitution does not guarantee the right to practice it. Adults can face severe consequences but aren't usually required to deny their faith. But the children are another matter. China wants to program its future and they need the young generation on board. So children *are* pressured to altogether deny the Savior.

Recently, according to Open Doors, Public Security Bureau officers burst into a children's Sunday school room in China and herded 30 children into a van. Despite

being scared, one child began singing. The rest soon joined him. When they were taken to the police station, the children were marched into the interrogation room still singing to the Lord. They were given paper and told to write "I do not believe in Jesus" 100 times. Until they did so, they would not be released. Instead, the children instead wrote...

"I believe in Jesus today.

"I will believe in Jesus tomorrow.

"I will believe in Jesus forever!

Exasperated, officials called the children's parents, some of whom denied Christ. But when a widowed "faith-er" came to pick up her twin sons, she refused to deny Jesus. Officers threatened, "If you do not deny Jesus, we will not release your sons!" To which she answered, "Well, I guess you will just have to keep them, because without Jesus, there would be no way for me to take care of them!" Exasperated, the officials said, "Take your sons and go!" PRAISE GOD!