

Living in Wartime: Pray for the Persecuted, Pray for Yourself

Hebrews 13:3, Acts 4:29-31

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May 26, 2019

When I lived in Los Angeles, our nation's stockpile of insanity, I had some interesting experiences in its unusual cemeteries. I went, for example to a Christian high school graduation ceremony in the Hollywood Hills Cemetery. Yup. Hey, they have weddings there, too. Yup. As I walked toward the graduation ceremony in the giant auditorium (yup) in the dark, past buildings and huge statues related to American history (yup!) I stumbled and fell—and found myself nose to nose with the gravestone of Stan Laurel, of Laurel and Hardy comedy fame. But it could just as easily have been Lucille Ball or another of the many entertainment stars buried there. And perhaps you might like it. The cemetery's self-description notes that "This park has some of the most spectacular scenery in Los Angeles, with stunning vistas of the San Fernando Valley and the Los Angeles skyline." That's what I'd like when I'm dead—nice views!

But far more interestingly and significantly, in Los Angeles I had my first visit to a military cemetery. It is a powerful experience to walk through a military cemetery. I recommend it. Perhaps this weekend. It is a good, but difficult experience. You look out at hundreds, thousands of crosses and other grave markers, and then you walk past them one by one. You see the dates on them, and realize so many died at the young age of 20, or 19, or 18. At my older age their lost years bring tears to my heart. Young soldiers who never got to see another sunset or raise a family or savor another Christmas dinner or hug a friend or lover—their lives ended so young. The sadness is palpable—so strong as to seem touchable—and so is a gratitude wells up as you think of how so many gave so much so that you might have so much, freedom and blessing. Such an experience gives us a remembrance of war, its reality and cost. But for most of us, most of the time war seems pretty far away, over there somewhere.

Sometimes it makes me think of a classic—and pretty crazy—movie called *The Matrix*. In the movie it turns out that most people are oblivious to the reality that their experience of ordinary, everyday life is actually a computer simulation—the Matrix—that conceals the deeper reality that they are being treated much like "human livestock," living batteries to fuel a race of machines. Sounds like wild science fiction, doesn't it?

But think for a moment about the classic—and pretty crazy—story called the Bible. In that story it turns out that most people are oblivious to the reality that behind and above and within their experience of ordinary, everyday life, there is a cosmic spiritual war going on. As it says in Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, in the New Testament, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against rulers and powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm." Wow, does it seem like that to most people? (For that matter, do *we* see and experience life that way?)

According to the Bible, we are living in wartime—in the middle of a universe at war—but millions and billions of people have no idea. It's no Marvel comic book *fantasy*, it is the world's deepest *reality*. And a significant part of that reality of spiritual war is persecution of Christians.

That, like war, often seems something far away. So, simply enough, this morning we want to reflect together *about* persecution, and learn *from* persecution.

Persecution is not natural in a good sense but it is “natural” in the sense that we should expect it and not be surprised by it. Jesus said, in his famous “Sermon on the Mount,” that we shouldn’t be surprised—Jesus noted that he, and the prophets before him were persecuted, so we who *follow* him will naturally face such a possibility. There is a spiritual war in progress, and there are forces that oppose Jesus, and may be hostile to us.

Christians *don’t* currently face persecution here in the U.S. to the degree that is common in some other countries, though there is some anti-Christian sentiment. Some Christians do indeed sometimes face hostility and opposition and difficult choices due to their faith. For example, one high school student put it, “I lost all my friends at school. Now that I’ve begun to “walk my talk” they make fun of me.” Or I think of another close friend who lost her job when she refused to “cook the books” financially as requested, actually demanded, by her employer. A Christian perspective in some academic fields may find opposition outside Christian institutions. And political or social views based on one’s faith may certainly stir opposition, sometimes strident. So following Jesus certainly can have its costs in our American society. But we are deeply blessed with amazing religious freedom here in the U.S. Christians very rarely face beatings or homes and churches bombed or burned, imprisonment, torture, death.

Now, that could change. Those here this morning who have lived as long as I, [me] have seen changes take place and things happen in America, good and bad, that we never dreamed would see. Cell phones and computers, gay marriage, the Cubs win a world series and soccer becomes a popular sport, 40 million abortions, approval of interracial marriage changes from under 10% to 90% positive about it, epidemic pornography, the twin towers, the end of the Soviet Union *and* a resurgence of socialism—things *do* change... But let’s give thanks for the relatively strong religious freedom we have now and the relative lack of serious persecution. Recent Pew Polling research ranked the US as the fifth most religiously free country in the world. So let’s give thanks, *and* let’s remember Christians who do face much more serious persecution.

Now it’s worth taking just a moment to note that though we are focusing this morning on Christians who are persecuted in high danger countries, there are and have been plenty of other religious folks persecuted, both now and through history, and sometimes Christians have done the persecuting. We live in a fallen, messed up world where conflict and injustice is sadly no surprise. Anti-Semitism anti-Muslim sentiments, as well as anti-other religions feelings are a sad reality in our world. But thinking specifically of Christians this morning, current research estimates that over 200 million Christians live in areas where they face a *high* danger of persecution.

When we think of martyrs many of us think of Christians eaten by lions in the Roman Colosseum, but in truth, *this* is the age of martyrs. Some research figures suggest that there have been more people who died for their faith in Jesus during the last 100 years or so than in all the 19 centuries before that.

Just recently, many of us saw in the news how Christian churches were bombed this past Easter. In North Korea, in Africa, in some Muslim countries, in communist China, in India—in many places being a Christian is seriously a risky, sometimes dangerous proposition. A recent British report used the term “nearly genocidal” to describe how the number of Christians across North Africa and the Middle East has dropped about 80%, much of that just recently. In Korea the “three generations rule” is followed. If you are found with a Bible, not only you but also your parents and children are sent to labor camps, likely never to return. In Mexico—yes, Mexico—some Christians are threatened, harassed, subject to violence from organized crime or the government. In Nigeria persecution has risen some 62% in recent years. In China when one is baptized, in many of the churches one of the baptismal questions is: Are you ready to suffer for Christ? Perhaps it is a good question for us to ask ourselves this morning.

(As one more aside, perhaps we ought also to ask ourselves about the danger of the opposite of persecution: comfort. Comfort can be seductive and de-motivating. I’ve sometimes wondered which is more dangerous for Christians: being persecuted or suffocating in our own fat comfort? It’s not easy to keep an edge and stay focused on following Jesus when we have the material good life. Remember that God specifically warned the Israelites in the Old Testament that when they got into the “Promised Land” they’d forget him in their prosperous new home. One of the reasons to remember severely persecuted Christians is to keep us aware of ongoing spiritual war and avoid complacency. But, this morning we are reflecting on persecution of Christians.)

One important thing for us to notice is how God’s grace shines in persecution. This morning I invite you not only to think about remembering and praying for persecuted Christians, but to learn *from* them. O, we do indeed have much to learn from them as teachers.

It is remarkable to read about how persecuted Christians love their enemies and bless those who spitefully abuse them. Time and again one can read in accounts of them saying to those about to kill them, “Before you kill us we want you to know, and to remember after you kill us—that we forgive you, and God will too. Remember that and later turn to Jesus.”

It is remarkable to read about Christians who speak boldly in the face of danger, like those early disciples in our second Scripture text this morning who prayed, “Now, Lord, consider the threats [of our persecutors] and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.”

One can read about a Christian named Paulus who was tortured by a Soviet Union officer who then said he would send Paulus to Siberia. Paulus surprisingly smiled. “The whole earth belongs to my Father, Captain. Wherever you send me I will be on my Father’s earth.” Well, said the Captain, all Paulus owned would be taken from him. Still with a smile Paulus said, “You will need a high ladder, Captain, for my treasures are stored up in heaven.” Then, said the Captain, a bullet between the eyes might be just the thing. But Paulus responded “If you take away my life in this world, my real life of joy and beauty will begin, I’m not afraid.” Then, said the incensed Captain, Paulus would not be killed but locked alone in a cell where no one could visit. But Paulus, still smiling, said “Captain, you cannot do that. I have a friend who can pass through locked doors and iron bars. No one can separate me from the love of Christ.”

It is remarkable to read about Christians who rejoice, as their Lord Jesus said to, when facing persecution. In Acts 5:41 the apostles are *flogged*, and afterward they “rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.”

One can read of two young Chinese girls facing death at the hands of their own pastor who had betrayed them, and they first urge him, “Later, when you regret... don’t despair like Judas but repent like Peter. And remember our last thoughts of you are love and forgiveness. *We die gladly.*”

Remember our own Belgic Confession writers and confessors. (The Belgic Confession is a statement of faith our church uses, and originally agreeing to it could be *very* dangerous.) They wrote that rather than deny that confession and their Lord Jesus they offered “their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire.”

It is remarkable to read of how some jailers and persecutors and executioners are touched by such grace, and turn themselves to Jesus, often become themselves imprisoned and persecuted.

One can read of how a hardened Soviet captain was caught by surprise when a twelve-year-old named Marco brought him a flower for his wife. “Captain,” said the boy, “You put my parents in prison, and since my mother taught me to love my enemies... so I have brought this flower for the mother of your children. Please take it to her and tell her about my love and the love of Christ.” The torturer of Christians was stunned, and ended up becoming a Christian among those he formerly arrested, considering it an honor to share a cell with those he previously hunted and imprisoned.

What is the “great reward in heaven” of which Jesus speaks (in his Sermon on the Mount) for those who are persecuted for his sake? I don’t know, the Bible is not more specific, but I’ve been thinking... I think perhaps it will be the joy of so serving the one who died for us. Imagine arriving in heaven and seeing your savior face to face, one would indeed feel honored to have been, in the Biblical phrase, “counted worthy of suffering for the name.” And it may perhaps be to find out how God used one’s persecution.

Rachel Scott, the high school student whom I earlier quoted speaking of her loss of friends, through her school shooting death later and her inspiration of her father, became the spark for the development of one of the most popular and helpful high school assembly programs in all of the U.S, helping thousands and thousands.

Or consider Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian imprisoned and tortured for 14 years for Christ, whose story I read about in college and 30 years later saw speak in Japan. He couldn’t stand to speak, due to his chronic injuries from that time. Did he ever dream, does he know his suffering touched me, a young college man halfway around the world? And thousands of others, through an organization helping persecuted Christians which he was able to found?

I don’t want to leave you with just a pile of “victory stories.” When Paul writes in Romans 8 that Christians are more than conquerors in their suffering from persecution, because nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus, it is both true that they/we are conquerors and also that the

suffering is real. Life is a messy business, and suffering is real suffering, not just the set up for an upbeat Christian testimony. Families betray families, as Jesus said. Christians deny their Lord like Peter did. Many break apart under pressures you and I can barely imagine. People suffer in obscurity and die. For example, I recently saw the movie *Silence*, based on the book about Christian persecution in Japan. Although I can tell you the story of Ibaragi-kun, a twelve-year-old boy with resolute faith in the face of crucifixion, the stories in *Silence*, of pain and confusion and suffering and failure are also very real. (Hundreds of thousands of Japanese perished in decades of persecution, and much was ugly horror.) So let us remember the victories of faith of those in persecution, but also the real pain and suffering and sometimes failures. (God knows, and in his time and in his way, Jesus will honor and reward his servants...)

This morning I invite you to “remember the prisoners.” It is not rocket science or complicated theology. The number one thing persecuted Christians ask us to do... is to pray for them. Pray. For. Them. There’s not a one of us who can’t do that. It is a fundamental way to stand in solidarity with them.

To help you I’ve prepared a help sheet that is available on a table in the lobby after the service. (And printed at the end of this sermon text.) It has several websites where you can further learn about Christians and countries with persecution. It has a video song, and movie and book recommendations that can stir your blood. It has practical suggestions of “bite size” actions you might take to respond to God’s word. I’ve put a copy of a devotional book called “Extreme Devotion” back there. Get that and read it at meals and I defy you to be unmoved. And in addition, I’ve put about twenty rubber bracelets that some people use as reminders to pray for those in prison and suffering. I’ve found that particularly helpful.

Finally, this morning I also invite you to pray for *yourself*. You may not face the prospect of prison or violence or even death, but most of us do have fears or shyness or anxiety about how we express our faith. I speak from experience. Look, I’m a pastor and a missionary and a religion teacher, right? And I’ve been shy or fearful about my faith more times than I can count. I wish it weren’t so, but it is so. :)

I remember, ruefully now, riding in a taxi in Japan, and I wanted to leave a small pamphlet about Jesus with the driver. But I hesitated, for some reason I was nervous. Holy cow, Mr. Missionary, cowering before the deadly taxi driver! Sure enough! Then I remembered a verse from the Bible that spoke of not being put to shame before *kings*! So I screwed up my courage, and after I paid I offered him the pamphlet to read. And he said... “Thanks.” I escaped the taxi alive, and lived to tell about it! Wow, out of the fiery furnace. It feels so ludicrous telling the story now, and embarrassing. But honestly, I’ve felt that sort of thing sooooooooooooo many times.

So I invite you to pray for yourself, that God will save you from a noodle-y spine and help you stand up for Jesus. I don’t know where the fearful place is in your life, but you do, and God does. Just begin to pray, just once a day, that God will give you “boldness” in the way you need it. It doesn’t mean grabbing people by the lapels and preaching to them. It may just mean speaking up about an injustice, or unkindness you see at work, or inviting a neighbor to a Christmas Eve service or not feeling embarrassed about reading your Bible, or offering to pray for someone, or

reaching out in friendship to someone different from you, or writing a letter to the editor—or dozens of other things.

Pray about wherever you need the gumption to follow Jesus in something you hesitate about. And pray that God will grow your gumption into a readiness and a peace, and indeed, a gracious boldness for facing whatever comes our way, whatever it may cost.

Pray for the persecuted, that God's grace will be real and powerful for them, and give them boldness.

Pray for yourself, to remember the persecuted and to learn boldness from them, for your own life.

Paul said in one letter to friends: "Remember my chains... and pray that I may proclaim the gospel." Paul speaks to us this morning on behalf of thousands, millions of Christians.

Hear, and remember, and pray, and learn.

Amen, may it be so.

Ways to Respond to Hebrews 13:3 and Acts 4:29-31

1. Connect with a relevant organization and/or visit their website – persecution.com (Voice of the Martyrs) or Open Doors, look up some education videos about persecution on YouTube (e.g., Prager U, The World’s Most Persecuted Minority: Christians)
2. Pray for “one” – pray daily for one persecuted Christian, or one country. The #1 request of persecuted Christians is for prayer. Pray for them to sense God’s presence and power and reward, pray for their families suffering also, pray for boldness for them even in their chains (Acts 4:29-32, and Col. 4:3-4).
3. Listen to Sara Groves – When the Saints, on YouTube. It’ll stir your blood.
4. Watch or read Tortured for Christ, the movie or book about Richard Wurmbrand.
5. Buy the book *Extreme Devotion* and use it for personal or family devotions. It will break your heart and give you a hunger to have courage for Christ.
6. Investigate IDOP, the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, and consider using it to help your church “remember those in prison.”
7. Pray for yourself, daily –
To be appropriately bold for Christ in your own life. To have courage for whatever you fear.
To be faithful in prayer for one (or more) of the persecuted church
For guidance/vision to see what is next for you in this area
8. Read and reflect on the Bible passages below.

Scripture Related to Persecution – A sampling

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.

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.**

Hebrews 10:32-34 – Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, *because* you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

Matthew 5:11-12 – “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Acts 4:19-31 – But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.”

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and **enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness**. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

Matthew 5:44-46 – But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

Acts 5:38-42 – Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, **rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name**. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Daniel 3:16-18 – Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

John 15:15-20 – “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

Hebrews 11:32-38 – And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who **through faith** conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,

quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. **There were others who [also by faith]** were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

Submitters of the Belgic Confession (one of our church's confessions) to the King – Said they would “offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to the fire,” rather than deny the truth expressed in this confession.

Rachel Scott – Shot at Columbine – I lost all my friends at school. Now that I've begun to “walk my talk” they make fun of me. I am not going to apologize for speaking the name of Jesus. I will take it. If my friends have to become my enemies in order for me to be with my best friend, Jesus, then that's fine with me.” I always knew that being a Christian means having enemies, but I never thought that my ‘friends’ would be those enemies.

Exactly one year before her death, in her journal:

I am not going to hide the light that God has put into me. If I have to sacrifice everything, I will.