

Prayer for the Persecuted Church

On March 10, 1876 Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, made the very first telephone call in history to his assistant Thomas Watson. What was this call? “Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you.” I’m sure had the first telephone call been made by a teenage girl, it would have gone very differently.

That might have been the first telephone call, but it was far from the first call. All the way back in Genesis we hear God call Noah to build an ark. In Genesis 12 God calls Abraham to, *“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation.”* And God has been calling people ever since.

He called Moses and Samuel. Isaiah and Jeremiah both received a call. Jonah got the call to even though he didn’t want to hear it. Mary and Joseph got quite a call. Jesus called the disciples with a very simple message, *“Follow me.”* Saul got a call that knocked him to the ground.

And then there’s you. Yes, God has called you too. He has called you to salvation. He has called you to let your light shine before people. He has called you to use the gifts He has given you. He has called you to eternal life. Some of those calls are challenging, but we are happy to receive them. One day, the trumpet of the Lord shall call us home, that’s a call you don’t want to miss.

There is another call we have received. It is found in Revelation 13:9-10. It says, *“If anyone has an ear, let him hear.”* Are you anyone? Are you included in that? Is he talking to you? Okay, reach up and touch the side of your head. Do you feel a protruding, fleshy piece of cartilage there? Do you feel that? Okay, that means you have an ear. And that means you are to hear this. Jesus used this very same expression. It means what you are about to hear is very important, so pay attention. It means highlight this, underline this, circle this, put some exclamation points out to the side. Don’t miss it.

Verse 10 continues, *“If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the patient endurance of the saints.”*

What? Hold on a minute! He wants me to go where? He wants me to do what? This is a call I’d rather not receive, thank you very much. And I don’t think I’m alone in that. I have never seen this verse on a bumper sticker. I have never seen it printed on a decorative wall-hanging. I was never given this as a memory verse in church camp or Sunday School. And yet it is so universal in its declaration- *if anyone*. Not just you Christians in Smyrna or the other seven churches of Revelation in the 1st Century, or just you Christians who are alive during the last days, just a simple, straight forward *“if anyone.”*

I. **Why We Have Ignored this Call**

A. **It Hasn’t Been Relevant to Our Lives**

Maybe we missed this call because it hasn't been relevant to our lives. We aren't threatened with prison or the sword for loving Jesus. This passage just doesn't have sense of immediacy or urgency for us. But what do you think this passage means to an underground house church in China? What does it mean to a pastor who has been languishing in a North Korean prison for years? What does this mean to Asia Bibi, the Christian woman sentenced to death by hanging in Pakistan for insulting the pedophile, I mean prophet Mohammed? What does it mean for all those believers on the run and under the gun in the Sudan or Iraq and Syria? I was talking to my wife about this and she said that compared to their lives we're kind of like the lazy housecat on the porch on a sunny day. The food bowl is filled. There's always water in our bowl. Someone keeps fresh cat litter in the box, and there's always a soft bed inside. I can see where we might have missed this call.

B. It is Hard

Maybe we haven't heard this call because it is hard call. Like Jonah, we don't like what God is calling us to, we'd rather go in a different direction. This just isn't one of the go to verses we want to claim for our own lives. Philippians 4:13, *"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."* Yeah, I like that one. Romans 8:38-39, *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* I'll take that one too, but go to prison, die by the sword? I don't see too many of us wanting to put our names on that sign-up sheet. We don't want to give up food bowl and the water bowl and the soft bed.

Today is the National Day of Prayer for the persecuted church. This is a hard sell to the American church. At a previous church I served we put on a Matthew West concert and we packed the place out with a thousand people, but when we had a prayer rally for the persecuted church, 20 people from 8 churches show up. Now in the interest of full disclosure, the man who planned the event scheduled it on the night of the homecoming game. Probably not his best move. We didn't even go to the prayer rally because our daughter was in the homecoming court. But isn't that a part of the issue, we'd much rather go to homecoming games, we'd rather go fishing, we'd rather go antiquing, go to the rodeo, or to Branson than seriously consider the call of Revelation 13:10.

This morning one of the things I want to get across to you is that it is important that we pray for the persecuted church, that we be concerned about what happens over there, that we need to deepen our understanding of those who must suffer for their faith. In fact, I hope by the end of the service that not only will you believe it to be important, but that you will understand it is crucial, because there is not near as much difference between them and us as you might think.

As I spent a year studying and teaching my way through the book of Revelation a couple of years ago, I was struck by how much it is a word for the persecuted church, for those who are suffering for their faith. As North American Christians we struggle with the book of Revelation, because we don't know how to read it. As Ed Czerwinski points out, "Christians in America have ZERO incentive to interpret the book of Revelation correctly."

What he means is this. We don't know persecution. We don't suffer for our faith. We expect lives of comfort and convenience, not trial and tribulation. We tend to look at Revelation as a key to decoding the future, but for the persecuted church, Revelation is the key to enduring the present.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who refused to give way to the demands of the Nazi Reich, and who died in a concentration camp for his faith, had a profound encounter with the book of Revelation in prison. For him it was not a book about last things, but "things before the last."

Then there is Katya, who was only 7 years old in 1917 when her pastor grandfather received word the police were going to arrest him. The Bolshevik revolution had swept through Russia and now the communists were purging Christianity from the land. Her grandfather spent his last night of freedom getting his affairs in order. This included burying the family Bible in a field so the authorities could not confiscate it when they came for him the next morning.

It would be several weeks before they were allowed to visit Katya's grandfather. They brought him food and clothes and money to help him through the harsh winter. Under the watchful eyes of guards, the family lined up at a barbed wire fence to speak to him. Katya had no idea when she reached her little hands through the razor sharp barbs to touch her grandpa that it would be the last time she would ever see him. He would be martyred two weeks later.

Grandma was the last one to reach through the fence and say goodbye. When their hands clasped that final time, he placed a small piece of paper into her hand which she secreted into her pocket. Later, in the privacy of her home, grandma opened the note. It explained where he had buried the Bible, and asked then to dig it up and read what he wrote inside the front cover.

They opened the Bible and inside was grandpa's final message. In hurried writing was a note that they should all read and forever remember Revelation 2:10. Turning to the back of the Bible, they read this piece of Jesus' letter to the church of Smyrna, "*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*"

Wow, what that message must have meant to them. Do you suppose they were driven to their knees in prayer? Even as an old lady decades later those words continued to sustain her.

I. Why We Must Pray for the Persecuted Church

A. So They Will Endure

This brings me to the first reason we need to pray for the persecuted church— so that they will endure. They need our prayers to persevere and overcome. As John writes in our text, *“Here is a call for the patient endurance of the saints.”* John knows this call isn’t easy. It doesn’t come naturally. It requires both a steadfast perseverance and unwavering faith.

Let me put this in context. Even though chapters 12 and 13 are in the middle of Revelation, they introduce the primary antagonists in John’s dramatic cycle of visions. These are the bad guys, the villains, the archenemy of Christ and his church. Chapter 12 introduces us to the dragon, and John leaves no question as to who the dragon is. He says he is *“that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.”* The dragon goes after the people of God through whom God will bring his Messiah. He tries to destroy them and keep the Messiah from ever being born, and he tries to destroy him once He is born. Failing on both accounts, the dragon then tries to destroy all their offspring, those whom John says, *“keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”* He goes after the church.

Chapter 13 introduces us to the dragon’s two main allies. They are two beasts, one from the sea and one from the land. And no, this isn’t Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Together, they form an unholy trinity and they are bent on making people worship and serve the dragon and destroying those who do not.

Some look at these two beasts and see clear symbols of ancient pagan Rome and the Roman imperial cult who persecuted the early church. Others look at these beasts and see the enemies of God who will appear before the end and oppress God’s people then. Either way, though, the same thing is happening. **Both involve evil, oppressive human governments and false religion that oppose God, oppose the church, and ultimately only serve Satan.** So, rather you see in this the first church or the last church, the underlying principle remains.

The attack begins with words. Vs. 6 says, *“the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words.”* The attack always begins with words. What does the beast say in its attack with its words. Look at vs. 6, *“It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.”* The beast’s words attack God, the name of God, and the people of God. The things of God are belittled, mocked, and ridiculed. The word Devil means slanderer. He is a liar and a deceiver. There is nothing he won’t say to attack God, his character and his people.

But the attack doesn't end with words. It becomes an all-out physical assault. Vs. 7 says, *"it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain."* If you don't worship and serve the beast, it declares war on you.

It is in this context John writes If you are called to go to prison for your faith, then go to prison. If you are called to die for your faith, then our purpose is to die. This indeed calls for endurance.

This is why prayer is so essential. Prayer has a very real power to reach out and sustain someone in a time in need. The power of prayer reaches beyond the laws of nature to the throne of heaven where God hears and responds to our prayers. A part of John's visions in Revelation is a vision in the throne room in heaven in chapter 5. There 24 elders have golden bowls which are filled with the prayers of the saints. Then in chapter 8 an angel offers all these prayers on the altar before the throne of God.

When you pray for a Christian locked up on the other side of the world, it makes a difference. There is a reason why Paul asked his readers to *"remember my chains."* Paul begs the Ephesian church to keep on praying for all the saints, *"and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak."*

The power of prayer is no different today. In Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of God* we meet a persecuted brother named Dmitri who started a forbidden house church in communist Russia. Many times the authorities tried to force Dmitri to close his doors, and yet his numbers grew. Finally, they came and arrested Dmitri and sent him to prison where he would languish for 17 years.

He was often beaten. They told him that his wife had been murdered and his children taken by the state. Dmitri finally broke under the strain and agreed to sign a document renouncing his faith. The guards said they would bring the document the next day.

That very night he sat on his jail cell bed. He was in deep despair, grieving the fact he had given up. At that same moment, a thousand kilometers away his family—Dmitri's wife, his children who were growing up without him, and his brother—sensed through the Holy Spirit the despair of this man in prison. His loved ones gathered around, knelt in a circle, and began to pray out loud for him. Miraculously, the Holy Spirit allowed Dmitri to hear the voices of his loved ones as they prayed.

The next morning, when the guards marched into his cell with the documents, Dmitri's back was straight. His shoulders were squared and there was strength on his face and in his eyes. He looked at his captors and declared, "I am not signing anything!"

The guards were incredulous. They had thought that he was beaten and destroyed. “What happened?” they demanded to know.

Dmitri smiled, “In the night, God let me hear the voices of my wife and my children and my brother praying for me. You lied to me! I now know that my wife is alive and physically well. I know that my sons are with her. I also know that they are all still in Christ. So I am not signing anything.” Your prayers for persecuted Christians can lift them up and carry them across the finish line.

B. To Be Better Prepared Ourselves

There’s a second reason we need to remember the persecuted church, and that is to be better prepared ourselves. The story of the persecuted church is the story of the church. There isn’t so much difference between them and us, and the distance is closing every day. Their story will be our story, for the story of the persecuted church is the universal experience of the church. The beast’s authority extends to every tribe and people and language and nation. The calm and comfort we have enjoyed is the exception, not the rule.

If you look at what is going on in our country, it doesn’t take a whole lot of discernment to recognize the pattern that is taking place. The same pattern I talked about before is happening here. First, comes the attack of words, and that is what we have seen in America over the last thirty years or so. It’s as if Christians are the one group in this country you can openly mock and ridicule. Academics write books against faith in God. Late night hosts routinely skewer those who take their faith seriously. Hollywood casts believers as little more than villains and hypocrites. Undoubtedly, we have seen an attack of haughty and blasphemous words attacking God, the character of God and the people of God.

But remember, the attack never stops with words. We are in a time of transition in our country. The beast is beginning to make war against the saints. We are moving from words to open discrimination. We are being told to shut up and go away, and if we don’t we are being threatened. A Costco employee places Bibles under the fiction section. Pastors in Houston were issued subpoenas by the mayor’s office and ordered to submit all sermons. The mayor’s office backed down, but I am convinced that such a maneuver is just the first in many such ploys, and future cases will not go our way.

A Christian college was threatened for losing its accreditation for its policy on homosexual conduct. Two Christians who run a wedding chapel were threatened with fines and the loss of their business if they did not perform gay weddings. Christian bakers have been charged and fined because they did not want to bake a cake for a gay wedding. Christian coaches have lost their jobs for praying with their teams. Graduates have been threatened with losing their diplomas if they mention their faith or pray during their hard-earned slots at the podium. City councils have been sued for having pastors

who pray in Jesus' name. Churches forced to no longer meet in school buildings. Christian owned businesses are now forced by the government to pay for and provide for abortions. Churches threatened with losing their tax free status for speaking boldly about the issues of the day.

One could argue this is not persecution like the church faces in many parts of the world and that is true, but there is an undeniable pressure that is being applied. How long do you think it will be before that pressure becomes persecution? How many years will it be before the first Christian in America goes to prison for refusing to comply with the state over a matter of faith? How long will it be before the first preacher is charged for something biblical said in a sermon? 10 years? 5 years? Read about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer if you have any doubts about how quickly it can happen.

As America slips ever closer to beast-like persecution, this teaching will require patient wisdom. We are used to our freedom of speech and freedom of religion. We've been given a voice in the public square, and allowed full participation in our nation's policy. As those freedoms are whittled away, what is the proper, biblical response? Do we protest, march, and engage in civil disobedience? How many of the weapons of this world do we use in fighting this culture war? And when do we accept persecution as such, and do as this verse says, because we realize the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds?

I firmly believe that as Christians we need to be good stewards of all that we've been given, and that includes our right to vote, our participation in the public arena, and freedom of speech. We should vote. We should participate, and we should speak persuasively. However, as those rights are eroded, there will come a time to simply turn our other cheek and do as John urges: *"If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword he must be slain."*

We will either drop to our knees now in prayer for the persecuted church, or we will drop to our knees later because we are the persecuted church. We will either pray or we will be driven from our faith. By praying for the perseverance of the persecuted church we are building up the very kingdom that will sustain us when our turn comes. If we don't pray for them, who will pray for us, when the authorities knock on our door? Who will interceded for us when our lives, our faith, our homes, our families are on the line? And so we will pray.