

The Persecuted Church Dan. 3:13-18; Acts 5 (selected verses) 10/17/21

A number of years ago I saw a large banner hanging on the front of the Presbyterian Church in downtown Merida, Mexico. It asked for prayers for 25 Presbyterian men being held unjustly in prison in the Mexican state of Chiapas. They had been falsely accused of participating in a massacre near the town of San Cristobal because of their Protestant faith. Twelve years later, the Mexican Supreme Court ordered their release, although several of their homes had been burned and they faced threats if they returned home. We don't usually think of Mexico as a place where Christians are persecuted, but this morning we're taking a look at the persecution of Christians around the world. It's an issue that affects millions of our brothers and sisters in Christ. The persecution of God's people is not a new issue, but one that can be found throughout the Bible and the history of the church.

For example, in the Old Testament book of Daniel, we read about how God's people survived their time in captivity under King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. You may recall that Daniel and his friends were trained and educated there and excelled in their service to the king, so they were promoted to important government positions. But all was not well. At one point Nebuchadnezzar, who is portrayed as narcissistic and unbalanced, builds a ginormous golden statue, and orders that everyone

must bow down to it and worship it whenever the royal musicians play a certain theme, as a sign of loyalty to the king and to Babylon. Most people complied. But not everyone.

<sup>8</sup>Accordingly, at this time certain Chaldeans came forward and denounced the Jews. <sup>12</sup>There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These pay no heed to you, O King. They do not serve your gods and they do not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” <sup>13</sup>Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought in; so they brought those men before the king. <sup>14</sup>Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods and you do not worship the golden statue that I have set up? <sup>15</sup>Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble to fall down and worship the statue that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire, and who is the god that will deliver you out of my hands?” <sup>16</sup>Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. <sup>17</sup>If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. <sup>18</sup>But if not, be

*it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up.” (Dan. 3:8,12-18)*

Enraged, the king does throw them into the fire, but God intervenes and spares them. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are honored along with their God. In this case, the persecution of God's people is prompted by their refusal to worship another god, a theme repeated in later times, when Christians refused to declare their ultimate allegiance to Caesar. Sometimes Christians today face similar dilemmas in countries under Islamic rule in Asia and Africa. And, sometimes God intervenes, but not always. These occasions require great courage.

Christians have faced persecution from the earliest days of the church. In Acts 5, we read this. <sup>12</sup>*Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. <sup>16</sup>A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.*

<sup>17</sup>*Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, <sup>18</sup>arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. <sup>27</sup>When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup>saying,*

*“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”* <sup>29</sup>*But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.* <sup>30</sup>*The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.* <sup>31</sup>*God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.* <sup>32</sup>*And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”* <sup>33</sup>*When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. (Acts 5:12, 16-18, 27-33)*

Early Christians faced periodic persecution both from Jewish leaders and from the Romans. In this case, the Jewish leaders were jealous that so many people were becoming followers of Jesus, so they lashed out against their leaders. This is a common strategy for persecution even today. Christian pastors and elders are often the targets of persecution in an attempt to intimidate all the other Christians, too. In the biblical case of the apostles, God worked through a Jewish rabbi named Gamaliel, and the apostles were released, although they were whipped first and given a strong warning not to speak about Jesus any more. Of course, they ignored that warning. Over time, every one of the apostles except John were put to death for their faith in Jesus, and John was exiled. Early

Christians understood that persecution was a likely consequence of following Jesus, but they followed him anyway.

After biblical times, Christians continued to be persecuted, and men, women, and even children were killed in the arenas by gladiators and wild animals for the entertainment of the crowds. Persecution lessened in the fourth century when Emperor Constantine became a Christian, but it became widespread again in Europe and England during the Protestant Reformation. It continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the Nazis persecuted Christians who spoke out against their regime, including priests and Protestant pastors like Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Communist countries around the world persecuted Christians during the Cold War and continue to do so today.

We don't think much about it, but an estimated 300 million Christians live under high levels of persecution. 300 million! Countries like North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritria, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria, and India are among the worst offenders. China has recently moved into the top 20 countries persecuting Christians with its ongoing crackdowns there. Our own missionaries to Tajikistan and Kenya have told us about the persecution that people in those countries face, and there is continued persecution of Protestants in parts of Central and South America.

Barnabasaid, an organization dedicated to supporting persecuted Christians around the world, publishes a daily prayer reminder, highlighting the challenges many Christians are facing. Here are a couple recent ones: Pray for Christians in Myanmar who had to uproot themselves and flee when the Myanmar army launched artillery strikes on their villages in Chin state. In Kayah state, a mostly Christian region, the U.N. warned of “mass death from starvation, disease and exposure” after “brutal, indiscriminate attacks” by the army against civilians.

Here’s another prayer reminder: Praise God that Aasi Bibi and her family have settled in a safe country after she spent 8 years on death row in Pakistan, falsely accused of blasphemy. Many other Pakistani Christians are facing such charges.

On Sunday, June 27 of this year, two women were injured when a bomb exploded in their church in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Fifteen men were killed by Jihadists during a baptism ceremony in Burkina Faso on May 18.

Finally, about 120 students were kidnapped from a Christian boarding school several months ago in Nigeria. So far 28 have been released and 5 have escaped. Kidnappings of students and pastors and other church

workers by Boko Haram and related groups are increasingly common there.

These are just a few of hundreds of such stories, detailing how our brothers and sisters in Christ are being mistreated throughout the world. Men, women, and children live lives of constant anxiety, as they worry what might be in store for them. So what can we do? Here are three suggestions:

1. Stay informed. Here are three organizations that give regular updates on the persecution of Christians around the world. Be alert to other news stories that bear on the issue.

Voice of the Martyrs      [www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com)

Barnabasaid      [www.barnabasfund.org](http://www.barnabasfund.org)

Open Doors      [www.opendoorsusa.org](http://www.opendoorsusa.org)

2. Advocate. Our government has enormous influence in some of these persecuting countries. Countries like Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan are US allies. We have influence there if we will use it. In many places we can link aid to improvements in human rights. We have done this in the past, but in the last five years, we have done much less of it. Let your representatives know that you are concerned about the treatment of Christians around the world.

3. Pray. This may be the most important thing we can do, and that's how we're going to end this sermon, with a time of prayer for those around the world who struggle to live normal lives as Christians.

*God of the suffering and all who stagger under the weight of the cross of Christ, hear us as we seek to stand with those persecuted for being Christians. Your cross bearers in other lands are living reminders to us of the cost of discipleship.*

**While we are at ease in Zion, they are in an exile of pain and isolation. While we are feasting on the good things around us, they keep an involuntary fast. While we assume a future of wellbeing, they don't know if they will be alive tomorrow. While we wear the cross as a piece of jewelry, they bear it as an invitation to abuse, exclusion, imprisonment, and even death.**

*Turn our hearts to them in prayer and acts of compassion and justice.*

**Thank you for breathing in them and in us the yearning for sharing one another's burdens. Loose their shackles and our complacency. Bind the forces of abuse and violence at work in their persecutors. In the silence, pray your mercy in us.**