

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(November 12, 2023)

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Sermon manuscript

### **THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH**

#### **Standing with Our Persecuted Family**

(1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14-20)

##### **Introduction: Promises, promises, promises...**

I have loved being married to Kathy for a long time. She has been and continues to be a wonderful wife to me, and we love our life together. I am forever grateful for her “Yes!” to my “Will you?”

I have also loved having played a small part in lots of other marriages via pre-marital counseling and by officiating at weddings.

Weddings are usually, mostly, delightful. There’s pomp and circumstance, flowers, music, and small or large crowds., and sometimes a bit of drama.

Weddings are all about beauty and excitement and celebration. The couple envisions happiness and holiness, maturing through life together, growing in love.

And, of course, a wedding is a setting for promises.

Standing before witnesses, the bride and groom make solemn vows to each other that will stabilize their marriage and give security for a life together.

I’ll never forget reciting my vows to Kathy on our special day, and her reciting her vows to me.

She looked me in the eyes and said, “I, Kathy, take you, Dave, to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for richer and in health, to love and to cherish, till death separates us.”

Of course, that is not quite what she said. Her vows to me and my vows to her included, “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health.

To promise faithfulness and love only in the seasons of better and richer and healthy wouldn’t stabilize or give any security at all. And, of course, it also wouldn’t be honest to only focus on worse and poverty and sickness.

Both parts of the promises are necessary. And the richness of years together is made richer and deeper and more solid by the combination of good and hard times, mountain tops and valleys.

The Bible’s promises to us who follow Jesus are similar in that they also provide stability and security, while painting a realistic picture of what a lifetime of walking with God will involve.

*The Bible tells us so...*

- Nehemiah promised the people of God in his day, [**Nehemiah 8:10**] ... “**the joy of the Lord is your refuge (or “strength”).**”
- God promises, [**Hebrews 13:5**] “**I will never desert you, nor will I ever abandon you.**”
- Jesus promises [**John 14:27**] “**Peace I leave you; My peace I give you.**”

Those are all great promises. And then Jesus gives us these: [**John 15:20**] “**If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you as well.**” [**John 16:33**] “**In the world you will have tribulation.**” [**Luke 21:12**] “**They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, turning you over to the synagogues and prisons, bringing you before kings and governors on account of My name.**”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also, Matthew 5:10-12, 44; Mark 10:29-30; Luke 21:12; John 15:20.

The Apostle Paul promised brand-new Christians in the region of Galatia (on the First Missionary Journey), **[Acts 14:22] ... "It is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God."**

And much later, he wrote to his son in the faith, Timothy, **[2 Timothy 3:12] Indeed, all who want to live in a godly way in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**<sup>2</sup>

It's important to know all of this, both the sunny promises of God's presence and Jesus' peace AND the real possibility of serious suffering. It is important for us to know that the biblical "norm" for Christians - then and now - is persecution.

*About the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church...*

Today, we are observing the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.<sup>3</sup>

Todd oriented us to this earlier. And, to this point, we have watched a very moving video, we have prayed, and we have sung songs that have brought to mind God's faithfulness even in persecution.

Now we turn to Scripture to hear what God's Word says to us about suffering for Jesus.

Our concern today is not with suffering, *per se*, as important a topic as that is. Today, we are thinking about suffering explicitly for God's sake. We're thinking about suffering because of faithfulness to Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

In many places today, many of our Christian family members are experiencing the persecution that Jesus and Paul told us to expect.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Romans 12:14, 2 Timothy 1:8, 1 Corinthians 4:12; 2 Corinthians 12:10.

<sup>3</sup> Last Sunday many churches observed "IDOP." Last Sunday, we listened as Dean Chollar gave his message, and today is our time to focus on persecution.

<sup>4</sup> The Bible's dealings with suffering are rarely concerned with the general suffering experienced by people in the world - whether believers or unbelievers. The book of Job would be one glaring exception. Job is unique because that book pulls back the curtain to reveal a spiritual realm beyond the physical. The Bible explains general suffering as a "given" due to the world's brokenness due to sin.

Thousands of faithful Christians die martyr's deaths every year. Millions of faithful Christians worldwide live oppressed and under constant threat of job loss, imprisonment, torture, or execution.

During our time together this morning we'll see first-century Christians and Christians today who suffer simply because they are faithfully following Jesus. Then, as we close, we'll consider how we can respond to the needs of our suffering spiritual family.

*Meet a church of unforgettable impact (1 Thessalonians 1:6)*

Our biblical case study takes us to the church in Thessalonica, a church that Paul established on his second missionary journey. (You can read the story in Acts 16:1--18:22.)

That church was a very healthy church, as Paul tells us.

**[1 Thessalonians 1:6] You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word during great affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, [7] so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.**

This church had tremendous impact, both in Thessalonica and on the whole surrounding region.

Which is not to say that life was easy for the Thessalonian Christians - and Paul knew just how tough it was. He mentioned their **"great affliction."**

So, as we'll see in a minute, he reminded them that things had been tough on the followers of Jesus right from the start.

### **The Persecuted Church**

#### **Persecution Hits the First Church Ever (Acts 3-8)**

Almost immediately after the church was born on the Day of Pentecost, strong opposition surfaced in Jerusalem.

- Two of the apostles, Peter and John, were arrested for spreading the news about Jesus and were ordered to stop talking about Him (Acts 4).
- When they kept on spreading the Gospel, the Jewish leaders arrested and beat all the apostles. (Acts 5)
- Soon after this, a church leader, Stephen, was stoned to death for his bold testimony about Jesus (Acts 7).
- Then, widespread persecution broke out with house-to-house raids that forced many believers to flee Jerusalem. (Acts 8:1ff...)

Paul brings up the early church's suffering when writing to the Thessalonians to remind them that their experience of suffering was not abnormal. It was the norm.

#### **Persecution Hits the Church at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:14)**

***[14] For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews...<sup>5</sup>***

Here's how that played out.

When Paul and his team came to Thessalonica with the Gospel of Jesus, they spoke boldly on three straight Sabbaths in the city's Jewish synagogue.

A few people from the Jewish community believed, and so did ***[Acts 17:4] ...a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a significant number of the [city's] leading women.***

Then, a lot of those who didn't believe opposed the Jesus movement and started a riot to stop the spread of Paul's message.

Given the fierceness of the opposition, Paul and his friends left Thessalonica to go to the neighboring city of Berea.

At first, things went well in Berea. But then, the Thessalonian opponents came to Berea to stir up trouble there, too.

Soon, these Thessalonian opponents forced Paul to leave Berea, too, which left the opposition free to go back home to Thessalonica to make more trouble for the Christians there.<sup>6</sup>

So, put yourself in the shoes of the Thessalonian Christians.

You have been a Christian for a matter of months, maybe a year or two. You have suffered one attack after another, one wave of persecution after another.

And maybe you're wondering - *"Are we doing something wrong? Has God forgotten us?"*

To which Paul would have responded, *"No! This is what Jesus told us to expect. This is the treatment the first believers in Jerusalem got. God has not forgotten you and you are still His treasured people. It's just that suffering for faithfulness is the 'norm' for God's people."*

Now, the reality of the possibility of persecution isn't news to me, and it may not be news to you, either. I've read the New Testament's words about persecution many times.

But I'm grateful to God that I now see this biblical thread of persecution more clearly than I ever have, thanks to a book I've just read.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Persecution Hits the Church Through the Ages**

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<sup>6</sup> The Thessalonian Christians would have been excommunicated from the synagogue. Other sufferings are likely.

<sup>7</sup> This book explores God's purpose for persecution, treats God's "impassability" extensively (by mostly disagreeing with the way this doctrine is often defined), and affirms God's creative order of making room for free-will agents (humans) to make free will choices for good or for evil.

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<sup>5</sup> Judean churches endured persecution at the hands of the Jews. But it needs to be said these days that nothing we are talking about should lead in any way to anti-Semitism. The New Testament affirms that some Jews delivered Jesus over to be crucified. But Jesus was killed by some non-Jews and He died for the sins of ALL.

The book is titled, In the Shadow of the Cross, and was written in 2004 by Glenn Penner, who was at one time president of The Voice of the Martyrs organization.<sup>8</sup>

The thesis of the book is that the Bible is a collection of books written BY persecuted Christians TO persecuted Christians.

The book is really good, and I highly recommend it for its great content. But among the most helpful parts of the book is that Penner lists incidents of persecution from all over the Bible, starting with the Old Testament.

He first lists the story of Cain and Abel. This is the story where Cain killed his brother, Abel. The first murder. Penner points out what I had never noticed. Cain killed Abel because of Abel's righteous worship of God. Abel was the first victim of persecution. He was a martyr, suffering for doing what God commanded.

Penner continues, highlighting episode after episode of Old Testament persecution.

- Moses was persecuted when the Jews threatened to kill him when they ran out of water in the wilderness. (Exodus 17:1-7)
- King Saul tried to put young David to death, David being a man who loved God with his whole heart, to death. (Acts 13:22)
- Eighty-five faithful priests were put to death by Saul for protecting David, whom they knew to be God's anointed. (1 Samuel 22)
- Faithful Elijah was persecuted by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, leading to his flight into the desert. (1 Kings 18:10--19:2)
- Wicked King Manasseh ***“shed very much innocent blood, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another.”*** (2 Kings 21:16)
- Just for obeying God, Jeremiah, suffered repeatedly at the hands of government officials. (Jeremiah 15:15; 17:18; 20:11, 37:15; 38:4-6)
- Daniel's friends (Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego) were cast into a fiery furnace for refusing to bow to the image of King Nebuchadnezzar. (Daniel 3)
- Daniel himself was thrown into a lion's den exactly because he defied the king's decree and worshiped God. (Daniel 6)

That is just a sampling of the times when faithful believers suffered because of their obedience to God in Old Testament times.

Penner moves through all thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, showing the persecution of the righteous in the historical books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and all the prophets.

Then, he moves to the New Testament and lists more of the same. He painstakingly goes through every one of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament and shows that persecution is either alluded to or it's a major theme.

Each one of the Gospels, the book of Acts, every letter from Paul, Peter, and John, and the book of Revelation in some way (and usually in a significant way) touches on persecution.

Glenn Penner has helped to open my eyes to see that, among other things, the Bible is a collection of writings BY the persecuted TO the persecuted.

It is important for us to see that persecution is the historical norm, especially as we see that it is the current norm for large portions of the church of Jesus.

It was certainly the case several decades ago, when Richard Wurmbrand was a Christian pastor in Romania.

Richard Wurmbrand and his wife, Sabina, after suffering for Jesus, first under the Nazis and then under the Soviets, were the founders of The Voice of the Martyrs ministry.

### **Persecution Hits the Church of Jesus Today**

*From Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand*

The Wurmbrands were young when the Nazis came to power and knew that they were in danger of persecution if they continued to be faithful to Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> Penner died in 2010 after a seven year long battle with cancer.

They knew, too, that they had to deal with the understandable temptation to fear at the prospects of physical suffering and torture, prison, or even death.

To combat fear, Richard and Sabina searched the Bible for the words, ***“Do not be afraid.”*** They found those words in three hundred and sixty six passages. They memorized them all.

The truths of Scripture kept them standing strong through their many years of persecution. (fourteen years in prison for Richard; three years for Sabina).

The book, Whom Shall I Fear?, was inspired by the Wurmbrand’s commitment to take the Bible’s words to heart: ***“Do not be afraid.”***

Whom Shall I Fear? is built around three hundred and sixty-six passages that direct believers to courageous faithfulness.

But they aren’t exactly the passages the Wurmbrands memorized because they never told anyone what those passages were.

Then, in Penner’s book, we read stories about present-day persecution, stories that are easy to find because they are so numerous, and hard to digest because they are so painful.

*From the book, In the Shadow of The Cross*

Within In the Shadow of the Cross we read about...

...religious intolerance in families where Muslim girls who become Christians are married off to Muslim men to ensure that they give birth to Muslims.

...teenagers in Ethiopia who are driven from their Muslim homes into the streets when they become Christians.

...young girls in Pakistan and India who are shot by family members when they convert.

*Segun’s story*

The video we just watched of Sejun in Nepal reminds us that there are lots of children who are brought up with no knowledge of Jesus or of a God who loves them. Sejun’s story tells us that when someone does tell them about Jesus and they do believe, they suffer.

In many parts of the world, overt persecution against Christians is a widespread and life-threatening reality. Wide swaths of our planet are danger zones in which a Christian family is forced to live in the shadows.<sup>9</sup>

In dozens of countries around the world, those who believe in the same Jesus you and I do suffer for their faith.

They have lost homes and seen their churches destroyed, have been injured, have been sold into slavery, and have lost family members to martyrdom.

Persecutors have done to them what the opposition did to the Thessalonians in AD 50.

*Privileged to partner with our suffering family*

Our church is blessed with a wonderful missions family. We are privileged to partner with and to support a great team of cross-cultural missionaries. Among those our church has supported who have gone out for the sake of Jesus, several have served Him in very hard places.

For years, we partnered with a family that served Jesus in India. Now, India is a wonderful place populated by about a billion and a half people. But there are places in India that are not safe for Christians. This family served in one of those not very safe places for a long time.

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<sup>9</sup> Vitaliy Petrov was one of the men who gave leadership to the Bible school in Kursk, Russia, that I served on several trips in the early 2000’s. Vitaliy is a 4<sup>th</sup> generation believer whose great-grandparents and grandparents died for their faith in Soviet gulags in Siberia and Kazakhstan. His father was a pastor in Kursk who opened dozens of house churches and was constantly harassed by the Soviet secret police (KGB). Vitaliy told me, *“In Russia, short periods of religious freedom are always followed by long periods of persecution.”*

We are currently partners with others who serve in dicey places in Africa and Central America and in an increasingly difficult Europe.

We are also currently supporting a family who lives in a country that is, even officially, very unfriendly to Christianity.

They are living there with their three children to tell people about Jesus. They have taken great risks for the Gospel.

### *Dangers for the national Christians*

Our missionaries face significant dangers. But those dangers are not as great as the dangers faced by the national Christians in closed countries.

Outspoken Christian citizens may spend time in jail, suffer loss of property, endure beatings, and even lose their lives - just because they are living for Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

So, in many places, things have not changed much in the last two thousand years. In many places, the Thessalonian situation repeats. And that's a quick look at the plight of the persecuted.

However, the plight of the persecutors is worse. Those who persecute put themselves in a terrible position.

### **Consider the Persecutors (1 Thess. 2:15-16)**

***[15] who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all people, [16] hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be***

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<sup>10</sup> I was once at a banquet in Nizhnekamsk, Tatarstan (Russia) with a man from a Central Asian country who told of knowing people in his hometown who were persecuted. He himself had been beaten by Muslims when he became a Christian but didn't consider this persecution. However, he did know people whose suffering rose to a level that he would call persecution.

***saved;<sup>11</sup> with the result that they (the persecutors) always reach the limit of their sins. But wrath has come upon them fully.<sup>12</sup>***

### **Under God's Judgment**

Paul knew about the plight of the persecutor firsthand. That's because, prior to becoming a Christian, he was a violent persecutor of Christians. He arrested, beat, and even killed Christians.

God mercifully revealed Himself to Paul on the road to Damascus and he learned that by opposing Jesus' followers, he was actually opposing God's Messiah. He then spent the rest of His life serving Jesus - and suffering for Him.

But Paul knew that persecution hurt and hardened the persecutor even more than it damaged the persecuted.

Ultimately, God will vindicate the persecuted. But those who oppose face an eternity separated from God.

And so, having tasted not the wrath, but the mercy of God, it is not surprising that the persecuted often respond with grace, mercy, and love toward their persecutors.

### **A Prayerful, Loving Response to the Persecutors**

Christian history is filled with stories of believers who have responded to those who are causing their suffering just like Jesus did when He was crucified: ***[Luke 23:34] ... "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."***

Then, while Stephen was dying a martyr's death, he cried out, ***[Acts 7:60] "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"***

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<sup>11</sup> Over the centuries of Old Testament history, the Jews persecuted the prophets God sent their way. Among them were Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and most of the minor prophets. So wholesale was their rejection of God's messengers that in the sermon Stephen preached before he was stoned to death he asked his opponents, ***[Acts 7:52] "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?"***

<sup>12</sup> Phillips version: Alas, I fear they are completing the full tale of their sins, and the wrath of God is over their heads.

Returning to Richard Wurmbrand, one of the books he wrote, Tortured for Christ, recounts some of his experiences from prison. He tells us that he and his fellow prisoners prayed fervently for their prison guards - while they were being beaten.<sup>13</sup>

See, the worst a persecutor can do to a Christian is kill him, which sentences a believer to an immediate entrance into heaven. The persecutor faces something far worse.

Christians with God's perspective see the wrath that is falling on those who cause their suffering and pray for their persecutor's salvation.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, this is what he said about his fellow Jews, who had caused him so much trouble: **[9:2] ...I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart**" and **[10:1] ...my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation."**

Many in the persecuted church today pray fervently for their persecutors who have not yet tasted God's grace.

I've had the privilege of meeting Christians in Kenya who pray for Al Shabab and Christians in Russia who pray for a government that opposes them.<sup>14</sup>

The persecutors are facing God's wrath and the persecuted want them to find the same mercy they themselves have found.

So, we've considered the persecuted and the persecutors. As we wrap up our time in God's Word, we hear about the loving relationship between the persecuted and a fellow Christian who loved them.

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<sup>13</sup> Wurmbrand: "I have seen Christians in Communist prisons with fifty pounds of chains on their feet, tortured with red-hot iron pokers, in whose throats spoonfuls of salt had been forced, being kept afterwards without water, starving, whipped, suffering from cold - and praying with fervor for the Communists." (p. 55)

<sup>14</sup> I have just finished reading a book by Tom Doyle (Killing Christians) that details how fervently persecuted Christians today pray for their persecutors.

### United in Spirit with the Persecuted Church (1 Thess. 2:17-20)

**[17] But we, brothers and sisters, having been orphaned from you by absence for a short while - in person, not in spirit - were all the more eager with great desire to see your face. [18] For we wanted to come to you - I, Paul, more than once - and Satan hindered us. [19] For who is our hope, or joy or crown of pride, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? Or is it not indeed you? [20] For you are our glory and joy.**

The word that Paul uses here to describe the separation (**[17] orphaned**) described a baby who was taken away from its parents.

That's how Paul felt in not being able to be with his friends in Thessalonica.<sup>15</sup>

So, maybe some people in Thessalonica were saying that Paul did not want to be with them, that he didn't care enough to come back.

The truth is that he was desperate to see them. He couldn't be with them because the opposition (Satan!) had kept him away.

And the Thessalonians needed to know that they and Paul were still joined at the heart, even if physically separated.

Just think how encouraging it would have been for the suffering new believers in Thessalonica to be assured of Paul's love for them.

They were living in the lion's den, standing firm for Jesus while suffering. And Paul was standing with them.

And as it was in the first century, so it is today. We are proud of our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering for Jesus, and we are honored to be their partners in serving Jesus.

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<sup>15</sup> Earlier, Paul described himself as the Thessalonian Christian's "**mother**" (1:7) and "**brother**" (v. 9) and "**father**" (v. 11). Now, he uses another family image to communicate how painful it was to have been forced to leave them so quickly after they had come to faith.

## **Conclusion:**

I want to highlight two takeaways, two “*So what’s?*” that rise from our time this morning in Scripture.

First. Help. We can help our persecuted family.

The author of the book of Hebrews, writing to persecuted Christians who were free and able to read his letter, wrote this: ***[Hebrews 13:3] Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are badly treated, since you yourselves also are in the body.***

Listen to that: ***“Remember the prisoners.”***

When Scripture calls us to “***remember***” the widow or to “***remember***” the orphan or to “***remember***” the poor, it isn’t just urging us to call needy people to mind.<sup>16</sup> It is urging us to help them.

So, today, we hear the Lord of the church calling each of us to look for ways to express our love and support for our suffering Christian family.

Kathy and I mostly rely on The Voice of the Martyrs to keep us updated on critical needs. There are other reliable, solid ministries that you can look into.

But the Voice of the Martyrs has a monthly magazine, a very informative website ([www.persecution.com](http://www.persecution.com)), a phone app, books, and other resources to let you know where Christians are suffering, what they are suffering, and where to direct financial assistance or other means of support, including letters.

Second. Pray.

Persecuted Christians always ask first that we pray for them.

So, here at the end, let’s pray...

...for faith to grow.  
 ...for joy in knowing Jesus.  
 ...for effectiveness in serving Jesus.  
 ...for fruitfulness.  
 ...for rich fellowship with fellow believers.  
 ...for encouragement.  
 ...for boldness.  
 ...for the salvation of persecutors.  
 ...for comfort in great loss.  
 ...for provision for material needs.  
 ...and for protection.

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<sup>16</sup> See Galatians 2:10.: