

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Various

"True Discipleship" (part 7)

PRAY FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH!

Today has been designated as the *International Day of Pray for the Persecuted Church*, a time for churches to remember and pray for those around the world who are being persecuted simply because they are Christians, simply because they profess Jesus as Lord. This is the fourth year we have taken time out to remember the persecuted church.

Such things go hand in hand with our series "True Discipleship." For a true disciple must recognize and be ready for the reality of persecution. In fact, Jesus said that if we want to be His disciple, we must *"take up our cross,"* and that means being willing to suffer and die for Him.

YOU WILL BE PERSECUTED

Jesus said something else, this time on the night before He died, **Jn. 15:18-21**: *"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. "If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. "But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.*

That, my friends, sums it up in a nutshell. There is persecution in our world because there is a spirit of hatred for God and the things of God. Why is there this spirit of hatred? Why is it that the world doesn't have a problem with the baby in the manger but takes issue of Jesus as Lord? Jesus told us in **Jn. 7:7**, *"(The world) hates me because I testify that what it does is evil."* Moreover, the world hates the Lord because the world does not know God!

You see Jesus is the ultimate truth bearer. He is the ultimate life-giver. In His hands are the power of life and death. You can either accept it or you can reject it. He is not only the truth bearer and the life-giver, He is also the law-giver and the judge. The Bible is clear on numerous occasions: Jesus is coming back to judge both the living and the dead.

And there's the rub. Persecution is a reality because there is evil and sin in the world. There is a devil, there are demons, there is supernatural evil. **Ephesians 6:12-13a** says *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this*

darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground..."

And there is persecution because of the evil and sin in our hearts. And until we realize this, we can never be free. Remember Jesus said in **Jn. 8:32**, "*You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.*"

And so people oppose the gospel because of demonic influence and spiritual deception, or ignorance and fear, or selfishness and insecurity. They don't receive the gospel because they either don't like Jesus and His teaching or the ones who are bringing His message.

And so we shouldn't be surprised when we get opposition and ridicule from family members, at work, from Hollywood and the media, from society in general. The Bible says in **2 Tim. 3:12**, "*that all who live godly lives will be persecuted.*"

BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED

And yet, Jesus says something else. In **Mt. 5:11**, "*Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"

Isn't that an amazing statement? Last week we talked about how blessing means having the supernatural power of God working on your behalf. We looked at that in relation to how we handle our money. That when we give generously, when we give the first of what we receive there is a special blessing. Now we hear that when one suffers persecution there is a special blessing as well. In other words, you are not only on God's side in that you are pleasing Him because you are standing up for His person, ways, and truth, but He will make everything you go through worthwhile – somehow, some way He will accomplish His perfect will through you and bring others into a saving relationship with Himself. But, again it is a matter of faith. You certainly can't always see clearly when you go through it, but somehow God is going to make good come from it. God will be accomplishing His purposes and glory through it all.

In fact, Jesus says "*great will our reward be in heaven.*"

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Let's face it - the prophets suffered persecution, Jesus suffered persecution, the apostles suffered persecution and many of our brothers and sisters today around the world are suffering as well. Here in the USA while our persecution is very mild compared to many in our world, we have a responsibility to stand up for the persecuted church overseas. We do this by talking about it, getting familiar with what is really

going on, praying for our persecuted brothers and sisters, writing letters, signing petitions and even financial helping them out. I would like to share a two few recent examples.

First, there is 32 year old Christian Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, a father and husband, and pastor of a 400 member church in Iran. He is currently under a death sentence originally for converting from Islam at age 19. Imprisoned since 2009, the authorities arrested him after he sought to register his church. Due to international attention and pressure the Iranians have changed the charge from apostasy to rape and extortion! Now the Supreme Court has ordered a retrial which is better than the alternative of execution but demonstrates the predicament Pastor Nadarkhani is in.

According to a CNN News Article, "Nadarkhani's trial and his possible execution have engaged American Christians, as well. Todd Nettleton, spokesman for Voice of the Martyrs, a Christian organization that attempts to assist with persecuted and minority churches around the world, called the news of the new charges proof that international attention on the issue is working.

"They are feeling the attention, they are feeling the weight of the eyes of the world watching how they are treating this man," Nettleton said. "I am dumbfounded, though that at this stage in the game, this is what they would trot out."

Voice of the Martyrs manages a Facebook page that has brought a lot of attention to Nadarkhani's trial. With comments updated by the minute, thousand of people have taken to Facebook to spread the word about the pastor.

In light of this news, Nettleton said the Facebook page would continue to be active.

"I think our first response will be prayer for pastor Youcef," Nettleton said. "Prayer that justice will be done and that he will remain faithful no matter that the days ahead may bring for him."

Jordan Sekulow, executive director of the *American Center for Law and Justice*, told Fox News: "Based on these reports, Pastor Youcef is alive and we have reached the highest level of Iranian government. I don't believe this would've ever reached the level of Khamenei without the media attention and outpouring of support we've seen."

Another example is a Pakistani woman named, Asia Bibi. She is a wife and mother, but her Christian witness resulted in her co-workers not only mocking her but also having arrested after she refused to convert to Islam. She was later convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to death. In Pakistan, more than 150,000 Christians have signed a petition demanding justice for persecution victims, including Asia Bibi.

One of the things that we can do is join with *The Voice of the Martyrs* (a ministry working on behalf of the persecuted church) and our Pakistani brothers and sisters in a call for mercy. It is hoped that 1 million signatures are gathered on behalf of our sister Asia, who now sits in prison awaiting the Lahore High Court's ruling on her appeal. You can invite your friends to visit www.CallForMercy.com and add

their names to the petition as well. VOM will deliver the petition, along with the list of signers, to the Pakistani Embassy in Washington DC.

WHY PERSECUTION?

Naturally, we wonder why does God allow such things? On the one hand, it shows the depth of evil and the depravity of mankind that is always lurking. It highlights, ultimately, what happens when one rejects the Living God. On the other hand, it demonstrates the true power and love of Jesus Christ. How Christ's truth, how His power and love cannot be vanquished! More often than not the persecuted Church is a powerful Church. There are miracles, there are conversions. But it is not only a powerful church, it is a pure church because only the people truly serious about their faith remain. It is also a way for the world to see the real Jesus and for the Church to realize that there is more to this life than what we can see, smell, taste, touch or hear; that there are some things worth standing up for and dying for. The very fact that this is Veteran's Day weekend is a clear reminder of such truths.

The Apostle Paul is a perfect example of the above. Once known as Saul, the zealous Pharisee and Jewish leader, he relentlessly persecuted Christians. He sought to have them arrested and killed. But then the Lord appeared to him in a vision and he saw the error of His ways. As a result, Saul, the persecutor and murderer, became Paul the apostle and martyr of the Christian faith. My friends, that is why we remain faithful. It is why we endure persecution. It is an opportunity for God's power and glory to truly be manifested. There is no clearer answer to why persecution than Paul's life. (**Read 2 Cor. 4**)

Ps. 116:115 says: *Precious in the sight of the LORD Is the death of His godly ones.*

There is a special reward for those who are persecuted and those who die for the faith. And my brothers and sisters we must never forget those who have given and are giving of their lives for the hope and sake of the Gospel. It is what true discipleship is all about. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!