

Articles and Sermons :: Lessons of the Persecuted Church by Todd Nettleton**Lessons of the Persecuted Church by Todd Nettleton - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2014/5/9 11:30**

It must be understood that there are no nominal, halfhearted, lukewarm Christians in Russia or China. The price Christians pay is far too great. The next point to remember is that persecution has always produced a better Christian—a witnessing Christian, a soul-winning Christian. Communist persecution has backfired and produced serious, dedicated Christians such as are rarely seen in free lands. These people cannot understand how anyone can be a Christian and not want to win every soul they meet.

—Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand, in *Tortured For Christ* (1967)

Pastor Samuel Lamb, one of the great men of China's underground house church movement, often says, "Persecution good for church." He knows this from firsthand experience. During more than twenty years in Communist Chinese prisons, his church grew exponentially.

Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand, founder of The Voice of the Martyrs (VOM), saw the same thing in Communist Romania. He once wrote, "I have found truly jubilant Christians only in the Bible, in the Underground Church and in prison."

For Christians in the Western world, this concept is a foreign one. How can persecution be good for the church? How can Christ's followers in restricted nations be truly jubilant in the face of terrible suffering? Wouldn't prosperity, large new gospel palaces and overflowing congregations be a greater sign of God's blessing and lead to more and happier, healthier Christians? The reality is that the church in restricted nations and hostile areas is indeed growing faster—much faster—than churches in the West.

God is using persecution as he always has—to build and purify his church. He is using it to call more people into sacrificial service to the kingdom. He is using it to spread his love and reach new people with the gospel message of salvation through the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Persecution has purified God's servants in restricted nations. But how do they prepare and persevere? In my travels for VOM, I have met with and interviewed many believers who have endured in spite of persecution. I have seen the smiles of pure, holy joy on their faces, even as they recount incredible pain and suffering. Here are five qualities I've seen that enable believers to flourish.

1. A focus on eternity. Persecuted believers choose not to focus on present circumstances or surroundings. Because they don't, they are able to worship from a jail cell or witness to a policeman beating them with rods. They focus on the promise that they will spend eternity in the presence of God. This allows them to smile from a prison yard and to feel blessed as they are persecuted. They know that in eternity their rewards will be great. They have seen the truth that Jesus promised—that his followers would face persecution (John 15:20). Now they eagerly await the fulfillment of his promises and the hope of eternity with him (Revelation 22:12).

2. A passion for soul-winning. As with Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, believers in restricted nations are willing to become all things to all men in order that they may win as many as possible to Christ. Their passion for soul-winning is producing an incredible harvest, as thousands are coming to Christ in hostile nations every day. Earlier this year I met a man in Bangladesh named Hasim. He had been a Christian only six months, and he didn't even know how to read. Yet already he'd led more than thirty Muslims to Christ. He had also been beaten for his Christian witness. The persecution didn't slow him down; it deepened his desire to share the gospel with those who haven't yet heard.

3. A God-centered (not self-centered) spirit. John Piper wrote an essay in *World* magazine in which he stated that many American believers have lost their enjoyment of God. "In place of this (enjoyment of God), we have turned the love of God into a divine endorsement of our delight in being made much of," he wrote. His essay points out that Western believers often get far more blessing out of what they get from God than what service they can do for him. Underground church believers don't have this luxury. They are not "made much of" in the worldly sense. In fact, they are beaten down at every turn. But they have a different focus—God. Rather than material blessings, their joy comes from knowing him and doing his work (Matthew 6:33).

4. Dedication to God's word. Bibles in restricted nations often have more value than gold to believers. I have seen C

Christians in restricted nations smile and laugh like children at Christmas when they open a suitcase of smuggled-in Bibles and other Christian literature. Many feel blessed to have just one page of God's word. They memorize their page, then trade with another believer and memorize that page as well. They know that if they go to prison, the only Bible they will have is the one hidden in their hearts (Psalm 119:11). Therefore, they make it their goal to memorize as much of Scripture as possible.

5. Readiness to serve. Chinese believers know that the Public Security Bureau could come at any time. Believers in Indonesia know that their pastor could be killed. If the pastor is unable to minister in a given gathering, someone else stands up with a message, Scripture or word from the Lord. Believers in house churches seem to have left behind the "here we are; entertain us" attitude prevalent in many Western churches today. Instead, they have grasped Isaiah's words of dedication, "Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:8).

A careful reading of the scriptures reveals that if we passionately follow Christ, we should not be surprised by suffering. Paul wrote to Timothy that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ will endure persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4, "Dear friends, when (not if, but when) the fiery ordeal arises among you to test you, don't be surprised by it, as if something unusual were happening to you. Instead, as you share in the sufferings of the Messiah rejoice, so that you may also rejoice with great joy at the revelation of his glory."

The message is clear: persecution is not an abnormal part of the Christian walk. Whether we endure direct persecution or not, may we dedicate our lives to growing the qualities in our churches that are so evident among Christians in restricted nations. These qualities will indeed help us to serve our King of Kings more passionately and effectively.

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