

International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

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Preacher: Tom Holland

[0 : 00] It is a privilege to stand before you on this beautiful morning as we recognize the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted.

It goes by initials, by the way, IDOP. You know, we're fortunate in this community. And really in a way, and we kind of like it that way, it's one of the hidden jewels of Bartlesville.

But we live here with the United States headquarters for Voice of the Martyrs. In my opinion, unbiased as it is, the greatest ministry for the persecuted Christians on earth today.

There are actually around 17 VOMs all around the world. And I know many of those folks.

And VOM USA headquartered here is bigger than all the rest combined. Not that bigness is a sign of blessing, but we have truly been blessed.

[1 : 21] And we've had opportunities to deal with the persecuted.

Present with us in this congregation are members who work for Voice of the Martyrs. We have people visiting from Voice of the Martyrs.

We have retirees here, members of our church that were with Voice of the Martyrs. And we have one member who is on the board of directors with VOM.

That would be me. I've been privileged to serve there in some small capacity for 20 years. In regard to my membership on the board, I want to make very clear that I am not speaking this morning on behalf of Voice of the Martyrs.

We have people that can do that. As one of the elders here at Highland Park, I am honored from time to time to stand behind this pulpit.

[2 : 34] But, and in view of the fact this is the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted, Pastor Mike asked me if I would deliver a few words this morning.

I want to begin, though, by all of us watching a brief video, and it is brief, and then I will make some additional comments. If you're ready, Mr. Lee.

My name is Jeanette. I am a Christian, and I love Jesus with all my heart.

I love my children, and I love the people of my country, the Central African Republic. There are both Christians and Muslims in my country, and we lived as neighbors as I walked to reach them for Christ.

But my hope for a peaceful life didn't last. Our village was ambushed by the Islamist attackers. Guns started firing, and we started running as fast as we could into the bush.

[3 : 37] All the Christians in my village were killed or driven into hiding. I fled with my children. We didn't even have time to put on our shoes or clothes. Attacks like these have been targeting Christians in the Central African Republic for eight years and continue today.

Churches and missionary stations that have been built over decades have been destroyed along with Christians' homes that have been burnt to the ground. In one area, the only structures that remained were the metal roofs of two churches.

Thousands of Christians have spent years in makeshift temporary shelters, far from their homes, as the violence and instability continues. Delivering desperately needed help to displaced Christians often means overcoming impassable roads, using cargo planes, trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, and even canoes.

With God's help, supplies are making it to Christians scattered throughout various camps. Today, Jeanette and more than 30,000 Christians in the Central African Republic have been driven from their homes, all because of their faithfulness in maintaining a witness for Christ in majority Muslim areas in the face of severe Islamist violence.

These courageous believers, our Christian brothers and sisters, in the Central African Republic, have shown God's love and forgiveness to their persecutors. They continue to faithfully follow the Lord and trust Him to meet their needs.

[5 : 33] Hallelujah! Now and ever we can fall Christ our hope and life and death Oh sing Hallelujah!

Our hope is greater than eternal Oh sing Hallelujah! Now and ever we confess Christ our hope and life and death Now and ever we confess Christ our hope and life and death Well that is the Central African Republic That is not unique to Africa It's happening all over It's not unique to the world It's happening in Asia In the subcontinent of India Pakistan It's happening in the Middle East And the pattern is disturbingly similar

They go into a village Usually it's false religion that does this Sometimes it's the government working with false religion And they go in And they kill the pastor And thousands have been killed the last few years We have a ministry at VOM taking care of widows and orphans through that ministry And The church is burned And then people are driven into the jungle I mean how would you like to have slept in your bed last night And now You're in the jungle And you have to try to survive And that's been the pattern And it's very disturbing And we see it increasing I want to make a few points at the very outset and hope that you will remember them throughout the message and throughout the day and throughout the rest of your life

First, we have been given very clear instructions by God to be ever mindful when it comes to those members of the body of Christ who are suffering persecution for the cause of Christ You heard Jeremy on video read one of those great passages This is not a suggestion from God He's not in the business of making suggestions This is a command And we read these words in Hebrews 13.3 I'm reading from the New American a little different reading but it's the same meaning Remember the prisoners as if chained with them Those who are mistreated Since you yourselves are in the body also

Just as if you are in chains sitting here in America with your brothers and sisters that are in chains You're chained with them In regards to that word remember I have been with persecuted believers on six of the seven continents My goal was to go and minister to them But in truth they always ministered to me Always I have never had in my travels a persecuted Christian in one of those settings ask me for anything It has never happened They have not asked for money They have not asked for food They have not asked for help of any kind The one common denominator though around the world is a question that they have for me

[10 : 11] This has happened to me in China in Vietnam in Pakistan in the Middle East in Africa One question Is the church in America praying for us?

I've been asked that all over the world And I'm being very honest with you this morning when I say I'm not sure how to answer that question I'm honestly not sure how to answer that question They're talking about the church in our country Are they praying for us?

And I dance around it I don't want to be untruthful but neither do I want to add additional hurt to already hurting believers Because the truth is that many churches and church members are not fulfilling the command of Hebrews 13.3 That's just true In fact in this age of easy believism many in churches across our country have never seen nor considered that verse of Scripture I do painfully remember a number of years ago a comment by one of the more radical televangelists stating that Christians around the world who are being persecuted are being persecuted because they don't have enough faith

That pained me to no end The vast majority of believers are members of the body of Christ All believers are members of the body of Christ and where are they?

Most are with the Lord We're the caboose The church today is the caboose We're bringing up the rear There's one church of the Lord Jesus Christ There's not a persecuted church and a non-persecuted church There's not an eastern church and a western church When we're talking about true Christianity there is one church There's one body of Christ That body exists in two locations The vast majority as I say are with the Lord They're with the Lord They have been gathering there with the Lord for 2,000 years There are also members of that body here on earth Many of them here this morning I hope everybody That's us

[13 : 21] That's the true believers The body is with the Lord and the body here on earth worshipping this morning Worship is going on with the body with the Lord and worship is going on in here we hope Now we're going to end our corporate worship around noon a little before Those with the Lord will worship around the clock if there are any clocks in heaven Not sure there are I hope there's not

But it is one church at worship One church at worship Where do we worship on earth?

Well we're doing it this morning in this nice building A little cool in here but that's the problem with the boilers I'm told Don't worry Mike Dursham's on it We always depend on Mike But some members are worshipping or have already worshiped today in caves along riverbanks in jungles and in basements hidden from view One of the most beautiful things I saw in China once was hymns being sung silently No words coming out because they didn't want the authorities to hear but they were singing them It was a beautiful beautiful thing to watch So those are our brothers and sisters being persecuted and we're commanded to remember them

When the sun rose this morning over the Pacific and traveled It didn't really travel We're rotating the earth We know that but we call it the sun moving from east to west It settled into China Vietnam Asia But it kept going Got into India Pakistan The subcontinent Kept going Middle East Africa Kept going Finally got here Western Hemisphere It rose on persecuted believers Beloved the sun never sets on a persecuted believer Never because they're spread across the globe Now I said at the outset it's a high privilege for me to be in the pulpit today There's another reason We've celebrated I-DOP in the past

Hope we do it in the future if the Lord doesn't come back for us soon Then we'll just celebrate it in heaven with persecuted believers believers But I'm the first speaker on I-DOP Sunday at Highland Park that is going to talk about persecution of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ at a time in the history of our country when very real persecution of the church in our nation is a possibility Very strong possibility I don't think it is too extreme to say that persecution has arrived in our nation It may take forms that are different than the church in Asia or Africa or the Middle East but it is here I've been told this many times by persecuted believers they say we don't know how you can successfully be a church in America and I said to them well can you explain that and after the first time

I knew what was coming I said can you explain that they said well you're fighting the persecution for one thing of materialism you know people are very successful in America and suddenly they're really successful and they leave where'd they go well they went to the lake or they went whatever they bought a cabin in the mountains and they tell me that called it the persecution of materialism but they said something that really resonated with me they said you know we have an advantage in China and Vietnam and India over the churches of America we know where we stand with our government and they said we don't think you know have an appreciation of that in the United [18 : 29] States but we know where we stand we had a young man speak here years ago from China and I asked him before he got if I brought him here I asked him I said by the way have you been arrested for your faith he said not yet what an answer he knew it was coming but he just said not yet not yet thousands of churches in our land have been shut down by various government edicts due to the COVID-19 outbreak and we understand the need for safety don't we we exercise that here presently dozens of our people are watching from home and we feel you with us we're glad you're with us some came in this morning wearing masks I had one it was in my pocket but I had one we are practicing social distancing we have pews that are taped off so that actually facilitates the distancing one state on the west coast one state government has ordered churches closed due to the pandemic those that don't comply face fines and arrests of their leaders one small church to date has been fined \$60,000 they haven't paid it yet they can't afford it there's about 23 members the pastor though asked the government agent he said what are you fining us \$1,000 a day seven days a week well we only meet on

Sunday and Wednesday what about he said you don't meet the other days obviously he didn't go he said no but if they don't comply with these fines and shutdowns they face the arrest of their leaders they're talking about even seizing buildings I find it curious that the same government that has ordered churches closed has allowed casinos to remain open that sounds like bias against the church to me if we are not ready to face persecution in America may I say something to you church it's time to get ready it's time to get ready and we've been very fortunate we live in the United States of America country we all love we have enjoyed titanic freedoms to practice our faith and we live in Oklahoma the buckle on the Bible belt literally but those freedoms can change overnight look at the look at the changes in 2020 I've got people saying I'll be glad when 2020 is over I hope 2021 is better those freedoms can disappear overnight so how does a person prepare for approaching persecution well it's simple and you already know the answer we appeal to the word of God we go to the word of God we go to the one who authored the word the spirit of God we go to the living

word the Lord Jesus Christ does the Bible have anything to say about persecution against Christians well yes it does in fact it's all over the Old Testament it's all over the New Testament I'm going to say this here because if I don't I'll forget it it's not in my notes but when the church as we know it the New Testament church was birthed on the day of Pentecost within about 24 hours Peter and John were in jail it didn't take long and they got out and a few days later they were arrested again it didn't take long so I'm going to highlight some passages and a few verses on this international day of prayer for the persecutor and I hope they'll be helpful as we look to the really I think immediate future I believe two things will be the catalyst of lessening our religious freedoms in America the first is an increasingly hostile post-Christian culture my beloved brothers and sisters there are people out there who hate us that's kind of hard to chew on isn't it there are people out there that hate us now I didn't make that up and no one likes to be hated but why did they hate us for the very reason that Christ Jesus told us that they would hate us in John 15 if the this is Jesus if the world hates you know that it hated me before it hated you you could preach on that a long time pastor if the world hates you and it does know that it hated me before it hated you if you were of the world the world would love you as its own but because you are not of the world but

[24 : 38] I chose you out of the world therefore the world hates you now that's not my words that's the words of the God of the universe who is incapable of lying he has no capacity to lie and he's telling us the world is going to hate us the Holy Spirit tells us in John's first epistle this first John 3 13 do not be surprised brothers and sisters that the world hates you it seems like it's a recurring theme persecution did not begin in the Old Testament I'm sorry in the New Testament Job experienced it with an almost unparalleled intensity and it's there in Job chapter 5 we read man is born of trouble as sparks fly upward just a few chapters later

Job said this man who is born of a woman is a few of days and full of trouble Job knew that first hand didn't he in the Psalms David cried out to God be not far from me for trouble is near and then he went on and there is none to help me well we have the apostle Paul he was no stranger to persecution we know that in fact when he was still Saul before he became Paul he inflicted persecution on the church he was no stranger to persecution he was the persecutor when he was converted on the road to Damascus he became Paul and he became the recipient of persecution in fact he was ultimately killed for his faith these are words that

Paul wrote by inspiration of the Spirit of God to his son in the faith Timothy my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch and Iconium and Lystra which persecutions I endured yet from them all the Lord rescued me indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted while evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse deceiving and being deceived go back to those words of verse 12 all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted if you've been around a while you've heard me say this before but a lot of you are new you haven't heard this

I once told a very strong Christian brother out at VOM you know I don't feel very persecuted when I read that verse of scripture he said be more godly it'll come and we both chuckled but it was true think about that you strive to live a godly life and it will ultimately come it doesn't get any plainer than that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted now I want to say to you that not every godly believer is going to be maligned not everyone will go to prison not everyone will be tortured for his or her faith not everyone is going to be martyred but all of us should expect opposition from this unbelieving world there will be opposition and this is especially true for those who actively live out their faith in the surrounding culture and the bible is very clear such persecution will continue and increase until the

Lord Jesus Christ returns for his church and I could add there even so come quickly Lord Jesus again we turn to Paul in his second letter to the Corinthian church we are afflicted in every way but not crushed perplexed but not driven to despair persecuted but not forsaken struck down but not destroyed timely words timely words the Lord Jesus of course preached the greatest sermon ever preached and he mentioned the inevitability of persecution the Lord mentioned it three times in Matthew 5 in what we call the beatitudes which are part of the sermon on the mount blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you

[30 : 45] I looked up that word in Greek the language of the New Testament this idea of persecution it means to pursue for the purpose of persecuting to suffer at the hands of persecutors and with the Lord's words in the Beatitudes I want to make an important point notice that the Lord uses words like persecuted for righteousness sake and persecuted falsely and those are very important distinctions that's what we're talking about this morning very important and may I say it is possible for true believers believers and church goers who may or may not be true believers to be persecuted because they're obnoxious I've known some of those none in this church but I have known some that's deserved persecution that's worlds apart from the persecution that the

Lord is referring to worlds apart one of the great difficulties in trying to understand how persecution fits perfectly into the plan of God we have difficulty how does that happen God is sovereign in all things but I can assure you that it does although we may not understand it at the time perhaps our understanding becomes clear when we read the words of our Lord in Matthew's gospel chapter 10 beginning in verse 24 thereabouts the Lord says this a disciple a follower of Christ a disciple is not above his teacher nor a slave above his master it is enough for the disciple that he may become like his teacher and the slave like his master by the way that's sanctification being recreated in the image of Christ and then

Jesus goes on if they have called the head of the house the head of the kingdom of heaven Beelzebub how much more will they insult the members of his household now that may not be a name we're familiar with I've never met a family that named a kid Beelzebub but Beelzebub and sometimes it shows up in scripture as Beelzebub it's the same is a name derived from a horrible false god in Philistine he's a he's a false god Abraham knew early on that Beelzebub was a major demon warring against believers he understood that the name is associated with the Canaanite god Baal B-A-A-L that is very significant

Christianity recognized that Beelzebub and Baal are other names for Satan we're talking about the devil here Satan he is known in demonology which you can study I don't recommend it but you can as one of the seven princes of hell Beelzebub was described as being capable of flying I doubt it because he's a false demon he became known as the lord of the flyers and that developed into the lord of the flies I think we even had a movie by that name I didn't watch it I cried at Bambi I'm not going to watch lord of the flies I mean that was two or three years ago he was considered the god of filth the god of filth the pharisees and the leaders of

Israel told the people this Jesus is Beelzebub called the creator of the universe Beelzebub this is the one going around raising the dead making eyes out of mud balls and accused him of being Beelzebub connected to Satan and do not miss the fact that Beelzebub is connected to Baal worship beloved I say this with a heavy heart but I'm going to say it I've been counseled with my son this morning he said you've got to say that I talked to a couple guys elders and deacons you've got to say this the centerpiece of Baal worship the very centerpiece of Baal worship was the killing of newborn babies some with a portion of the umbilical cord still attached they were new newborn babies now

[36 : 21] I'm going to say to you this you can get on the computer wikipedia and look this up if you want to but these infants were sacrificed in a manner so horrific I will not describe it to you from this pulpit I won't do that if you want to know see me privately and I'll tell you pray that you never live in a country that kills its babies and I say that and tear up at the same time since 1973 we've killed 60 million worldwide over a billion and the world goes as America goes I can't think of anything that would more infuriate God than the killing of one of his children one of his babies people say well wait a minute why isn't

God judging America well I think he is look around but remember this judgment delayed is never judgment denied he's patient God is long suffering and he may delay judgment but he will never deny judgment so does God have any counsel for us this morning as we face persecution I think he does back in Matthew 10 do not fear them that persecute you for there's nothing concealed that will not be revealed or hidden that will not be known what I tell you in darkness tell in the light and what you hear whispered in your ear proclaim on the housetops do not be afraid of those who killed the body but are unable to kill the soul central african probably they killed that pastor he's now on the martyr's wall at the

VOM if you've never been out there to see that go out there and see that don't fear the one that can kill your body rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell that's God therefore everyone who confesses me before people I will confess him before my father who is in heaven but

whoever denies me before people I will also deny him before my father who is in heaven there is a verse of scripture very brief tucked into the words of Christ in John chapter 16 verse 2 by the way that's the upper room Jesus is mere hours from rest torture crucifixion and death when these words are uttered in the upper room this is a warning from

Jesus the God of the universe the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God isn't that utterly amazing the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God and I want to say to you there's a strong likelihood that this morning when we came in to the sanctuary for the purpose of worship somewhere in this world a believer has died for his or her faith and you want to know why it's really simple they won't say three words they won't say three words they refuse to say to the government or to false religion

I deny Christ and it's easy for me to think well I would never say those words and then I think when I've got a gun to my head or when a gun is to my grandchildren's head what would I do we have to get ready we have to get ready Stephen was the first martyr of the church Stephen was killed for his faith because he gave a strong witness for Christ and he was stoned to death and it's most instructive because there was a young man there who was a high flyer people think he was a future high priest of Israel he was in training he was on management track he led that persecution he led it in fact he held their coats so they could throw the rocks harder at

[42 : 08] Stephen's head and face and we know that man's name is Saul of Tarsus later he became Paul the greatest Christian the greatest witness the greatest missionary the greatest church founder in history who wrote the foundation of the church in 13 books in the New Testament and for my good friends here maybe 14 Stephen is being martyred and he looks up and he says father don't hold this sin against them does that sound familiar to anyone that's Jesus on the cross father forgive them for they know not what they are doing forgive them Stephen looks up and says don't hold this sin against them and then he cries out he's being hit with rocks he cries out he says

I see Jesus he looked up in heaven he said I see Jesus standing before the father now put that on hold for a second we're going to go back a few years no not that long well maybe Jesus has been arrested taken before the Sanhedrin which in Israel is the executive legislative and judicial branch of government taken before the chief priest who is the chief justice of their supreme court and they're not getting anywhere with him and finally the chief priest put him under oath he said I adjure you under oath tell us are you the Christ the Messiah the anointed one from

God and Jesus said I am have you heard those words before Moses heard them from the burning bush tell him I am sent you they heard that in the garden when Jesus said whom seek you he said I am your Bible added he that's not in there it's in italics I am the sacred name of God Yahweh they all fell down he spoke to the high priest the!

name of God I am and he said henceforth you shall see the son of man coming with the clouds of glory and you will see me seated at the right hand of God that's when the high priest tore his robe which is a violation of the law and said what further need have we of witnesses He's blasphemed he needs to be executed take him to the Romans we need him dead Jesus said you're going to see me seated next to the father Stephen though looks up and says I see Jesus standing before the father what's the difference in scripture when Jesus is seated he is judge at the great white throne judgment of the unsaved they will see

Jesus seated as the judge and the books will be opened their names are not in the book of life but Stephen sees him not as the judge he sees him standing that's the position of the advocate that's a Greek word for defense attorney if you're ever in trouble it'd be great if your defense attorney is your judge that's a pretty good system he's the defense attorney he's the advocate he's the propitiator the appeaser he has satisfied the wrath of God there is therefore now no condemnation who are in Christ Jesus and he says I see him advocating interceding for me before the father and then it says Stephen fell asleep persecuted to death it happens every day it will happen every day until

[46 : 49] Jesus returns and even so come quickly Lord Jesus Thank you.