

Christian Persecution

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn again to 1st Peter chapter 5. 1st Peter chapter 5, the words we find in verse 8, Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. It's this particular second part of the verse, your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, that I thought we could usefully have a little look at today.

The night had fallen when 19-year-old Yuvie heard the knock at the door.

From the loudness of the knocking, from the voice of the men outside, she knew that they had come for her husband.

And so with her 9-month-old baby in her arms, she watched helplessly as they took her husband away.

This happened in Colombia. Those who took him away were the FARC guerrilla, Marxist terrorists, that belonged to the oldest guerrilla outfit in the world.

[1 : 44] Joel Cruz Garcia, her husband, was pastor of the small congregation in El Dorado. And that night, last July, he was beaten.

He was tortured. And they demanded of him, Are you not afraid to die? And his response was, To me, to live as Christ, to die as gain.

They shot him. That same night, Pastor Umberto Mendez, a 63-year-old, was also killed.

I want us to think about the reality in today's world of what this verse from Peter's epistle is talking about.

The devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. One in ten Christians in the world today are persecuted.

[2 : 49] If I was to do something that I'm sure you can remember your PE teacher doing quite often, just number you off one to ten and then at the end of it ask everyone number ten to stand up, there will be quite a few people around here standing up.

Just imagine that and think these people would be the people being persecuted for their faith. more martyrs in the 20th century than in all the previous centuries put together.

We've heard about the martyrs in our own land. We've heard about people who have died for their faith even in Scotland centuries ago. We've heard of those who died for their faith in the Roman Empire.

But during the 20th century more people have died for believing in Jesus than in any other century, all the other centuries put together.

In fact, it's reckoned that 259 million Christians in 60 different countries today are persecuted for their faith. They are denied the most basic fundamental human rights simply because they are Christians.

[4 : 14] Okay, that's enough for statistics. Some of you can breathe a sigh of relief. A lot of people don't like statistics. But we'll hear more stories like the story of Yuvie who, after her husband was taken away, took her baby with her to a nearby town and there she continues to serve the Lord.

She gathers the testimonies of those who have been persecuted, those who disappear because they are Christians and lets the rest of the world, lets us know here in Stormway today about these people.

There are more, perhaps it should be admitted that there are more martyrs today because the church is much bigger today than it was before.

But before we go on to look at more of the martyrs, perhaps we can note that persecution comes in many different forms.

2 Peter goes on to describe those who deceive believers. And there's no doubt about it that the devil is very, very active in our own land as he uses mental warfare as it is, trying to persuade people to turn their backs on Christ.

[5 : 49] Many are marginalized. Many throughout the world find no security, not even among those who ought to be giving security, the police force, the courts, and we should be so grateful that in our own land here, we can trust those who uphold the rule of law in our land.

Think of Muhammad Hagasy and his wife Katharina. They also have got a baby, a baby daughter, Miriam.

Muhammad and Katharina live in Egypt. They live in hiding. Why are they living in hiding? Simply because they were Muslims and now they are Christians.

They have been converted. They have put their trust in Jesus. They have come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is the Saviour of the world and that there is only hope to be found in him.

In Egypt, everybody has got identity papers. And in these identity papers, your religion is marked down.

[7 : 15] So whether you are a Christian or a Muslim or whatever other religion you may be, that is marked down clearly in your identity papers and you are treated accordingly.

Muhammad and Katharina are officially Muslim. The law says they can change their religion, that they are perfectly free to change their religion.

And then, of course, they have to get their papers processed so that their identity documents show that they are now Christians. In practice, however, if you were a Christian and you became a Muslim, you would have your papers processed almost overnight.

If you are a Muslim and you become a Christian, then not only do you find that you've got a mountain of red tape that makes it impossible for you to get your legal right to be recognized now as a Christian, but you find that you've got opposition from those who ought to be supporting you.

Muhammad and Katharina, they are in hiding because they are in fear of their lives and for their little daughter Miriam, not only from extremists, but even from the police, even from those who ought to be supporting law in Egypt, even from their own families.

[8 : 46] They are particularly keen to see this process through because they want Miriam to grow up officially as a Christian child, to be recognized as a Christian child.

if not, she may be taken from them. They will be considered unfit to look after her. Officially, she will be recognized as Muslim and their parents as apostate.

That's what it means for many people in the Islamic world today. Persecution takes many forms, but persecution also has been promised.

Christ. It's worth noticing that different verses that we have in the New Testament. A servant is not greater than his master, Jesus said. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

Again, Jesus said, in the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world. And Paul in his letter to Timothy said, indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

[10 : 04] He didn't say might be or maybe. He said will be. We do perhaps live in a world that has been a community that has been influenced by the gospel very strongly.

And for that reason, perhaps we don't see quite the same level of persecution. But of course, even in our own community, we may suffer ridicule for being a Christian, for taking a Christian stance.

But one of these verses there, the words of Jesus, remind us too that God is sovereign. We've seen the fact of persecution, but we see also that persecution is limited by the sovereignty of God.

Jesus said, in the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, I have overcome the world. In 1 John, we find quite a lot of this in John's writings.

In 1 John chapter 3 verse 8, John said, Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil. in 1 John chapter 4, he said, he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

[11 : 33] And then in the whole book of Revelation, which we've been privileged to hear expounded to us by our minister in recent times, in the whole book of Revelation, we've got this one message coming through time and time and time again.

The devil is strong. The devil is powerful. There will be deceit. There will be persecution. There will be tribulation. But God is more powerful.

He is in control. There is a hope for Christians, a hope that is unshakable. No matter what the devil may do, whatever you think about Armageddon, whatever the devil might do to bring together all the forces of evil at one time, in a concentrated form, to fight against the people of God, however he might try, he will fail.

For Jesus has won the victory. But what does it mean to us that there are people being persecuted throughout the world?

We don't see people here in Stornoway being killed, being murdered for their faith. In Somalia, in the Horn of Africa, a Christian may be taken, and has been, taken off the bus and just shot in the street like a dog, simply because he was a Christian.

[13 : 13] that has happened and continues to happen. But there's one thing that 1 John, the epistle of 1 John, reminds us, and that is that we are the children of God.

That is what gives us hope in the face of persecution. It's what gives our persecuted brethren hope in the face of the awful persecution experience, but also reminds us that if we are children of God, so are they.

That makes them our brothers and sisters in the Lord. If one member suffers, Paul said to the Corinthians, all suffer together.

If one member is honoured, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

And so as we think of the privilege, inestimable privilege it is that we should be the children of God, let us remember that we belong to a family.

[14 : 25] We don't really forget that. Perhaps you'll forgive me if I bring in just something a little personal here. Over the past year, Anne and I have been very conscious of the support we've received from our family here in the Stornoway congregation.

The number of people among you who have been praying for us and for Don is something we will never forget. We will always be grateful for it.

That is what it means to be part of a family, to be part of God's family. And as you travel throughout the world, as some of us have had this privilege, you meet other people from different cultures, different parts of the world, speaking different languages, and you recognize them too.

Yes, there's a brother, there's a sister. We belong to the same family. We've had different upbringings, different educations, different cultures, but we belong to the same family.

And what a tremendous thrill and privilege it is to be able to worship with them. And so, for that reason, we must remember those of our family, our family in the Lord, who suffer greatly.

[15 : 55] Let me run through a kind of survey, a quick survey. I hope you'll be with me of the world today and the sufferings that are there.

Take Africa. Take the Islamic north of Africa. It is largely expected that you be a Muslim.

If you belong to Libya, if you belong to Morocco, Sudan, if you belong to Sudan, Sudan operates Sharia law, official Islamic law.

Egypt has a constitution that officially protects other faiths, but as we have seen in the case of Mohammed and Katarina, in practice, it's very, very different.

Tunisia is more open, but Algeria, where there had been so much bloodshed about ten years ago, again the persecution is beginning to arise.

[17 : 11] And people are being threatened, being imprisoned, because they are Christians. part of the reason for that is that the church in Algeria is growing.

And very often that is what sparks off persecution, where more and more people are coming to faith in Christ, and the authorities become alarmed.

It's not only Islam in Africa, and not only in the north. Islam has penetrated much further south in Africa, both east and west.

Angola, which was Marxist for a long time, has got Islamic persecution of believers there today.

Nigeria is divided between the north, Islamic, and the south.

And over the past few years, many people have lost their lives, lost their livelihoods, their houses gone up in flames, their churches burnt to the ground, as the Islam attempts to dominate totally in northern Nigeria.

[18 : 31] But Eritrea, there it's different. It's more a Marxist influence in the government, where they have determined that there are certain religions that are allowed, certain churches that are allowed, and if you don't belong to these, then there's severe persecution.

Just move a little bit further to the east, to Saudi Arabia. I think probably we all know, Saudi Arabia, the home of Mecca, the home of the Wahhabi sect, the Wahhabi sect that have produced Al-Qaeda, the strictest of Islamic interpretations of the Quran.

There, for example, there was a young girl, Fatima. She learned about Jesus through the internet. And praise the Lord, these modern technologies are getting the gospel places where Christian missionaries could never go.

Texting, mobile phones, the internet, even radio and television is getting the Christian message into Saudi Arabia, into countries where it is forbidden for people to gather together for Christian worship. Fatima learned about Jesus through the internet. and she became a Christian. And she, like a lot of young people throughout the world, exchanging with other young people on the internet.

[20 : 22] It was not safe to let her family know. But her brother did find out. He did find out that Fatima had come to have Christian convictions.

there were serious arguments at home, heated discussions, and the end result was that Fatima's father, who worked for the government agency that enforces Islamic purity, took his own daughter's life.

He killed his own daughter. He is now under arrest for what he did. Because even in Saudi Arabia, that is not allowed.

It is not legal. What about the other hot spots of the world? Iraq.

We hear about the bombs going off there. We hear about people being killed in the marketplaces. but there is also a specific targeting of Christians there.

[21 : 38] Thousands of Christians have had to flee Iraq, mostly going across the border into Jordan or Syria. Thousands of them have had to leave everything behind.

In these days, we have heard about the credit crisis. We have heard about people, very unfortunate people, who have lost their houses.

They can no longer pay the mortgage. We think how dreadful that is, that all your hopes there for your own home is gone.

But these Christians in Iraq, their businesses, their homes, everything they've got, they've just got to leave it and flee. They become displaced people with nothing much more than the clothes on their backs.

But in Baghdad, and also particularly just now in the north of Iraq, among the Kurds in Mosul, the message is being delivered to Christians, get out or be killed.

[22 : 48] And it's not an empty threat because many have been killed. Yusuf Adel, 47, married with three children gunned down on his way to church.

Never thought about that when we came to church this morning, did we? That somebody might be lurking around the corner with a gun. Doesn't happen in Stornoway. But it happens not only in Iraq, it happens in many other parts as well.

Take Iran. A new law in Iran says that day the death penalty is mandatory for apostasy from Islam. Now that's not, while that has been passed, it still has to go through a further stage before that could actually be implemented in the courts.

Even so, the death sentence is carried out in Iran unofficially. on the 17th of July, that's not so long ago, the evening gathering of a house church in Isfahan was visited by security officials.

[24 : 08] All were arrested. Abbas Amiri, the host of that group there, was savagely beaten and died a fortnight later.

A few days after that, his wife died from the treatment that she had been received. Why were they particularly targeted? Well, Abbas had been a staunch Muslim.

He had made a pilgrimage to Mecca. He had fought with bravery and distinction in the Iran-Iraq war. Yet, he became a Christian.

He became active in the church. He was now leading and helping organise a group in Isfahan. So he was seen to be not only an apostate, but a traitor.

And he was targeted. If we go into the Central Asia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, the pattern there varies a bit.

[25 : 19] Some of the countries there are establishing laws trying to prohibit people from changing their religion. They're trying to control religion.

For some of them, they're afraid of the Islamic extremists. They're afraid of Al-Qaeda type insurgents who might destabilise the government.

For some of them, it's the old thinking of the former Soviet Union days. But in Kyrgyzstan, there was a pastor, Sak Tinbai, his name was, converted from Islam, became a pastor of a small group of believers.

He was found murdered in his own house with pages torn from a Bible scattered around the room. I wanted to mention him, not only because there are many others like him whose names we don't know, who just simply disappeared, just another murder in some faraway country.

But I like the sequel to this. His son, I'm not sure where he was when his father was murdered, but he came back home, back to the place where his father had been pastored, and he took up the reins of the congregation.

[26 : 45] He became the pastor for that congregation. And it's that courage, it's that hope, it's that faith that challenges us.

A year or two ago, I remember hearing, it was from the north of Iran, a young couple with a little girl. The young couple were arrested. They were organizing a church in the north of Iran. The lady, the wife of the pastor there, was the daughter of a former Bible society secretary in Iran, in Tehran. He had been murdered many years ago, murdered because he was a leader in the Christian church in Iran. She, his daughter, knew all about that.

She knew the cost of following Christ. And yet, she was active in the church, supporting her husband, a pastor, in Iran.

[27 : 57] There is, there is hope. time is going on. I would need to mention just one more area.

For we've mentioned a fair bit about the Islamic world. But it's not only in the Islamic world. In Orissa, and please pray for India in these days.

Not only the state of Orissa, but other states as well, but particularly the state of Orissa and nearby states.

Some years ago, there was an eruption of anti-Christian persecution, in which Christians lost their livelihoods and some of them lost their lives.

But this year, there was a murder. This time, it was the leader of the local Hindu extremist party, who had been particularly anti-Christian.

[29 : 03] He was murdered. He was murdered by Marxist guerrillas, Marxist terrorists. They claimed the murder. But in spite of the fact that he had been murdered by Marxist extremists, his followers turned with great violence on the Christian community.

Thousands were driven out from their homes. Many houses and businesses were looted and burnt. We don't know how many were killed.

Probably over a hundred killed. Many traumatised. 50,000 forced to flee.

You can read about these details of these attacks in the literature. I can't bring them to you this morning.

In a gathering like this, I couldn't even read out from the Christian literature all of the details. It wouldn't be right. And so, in closing and summing up, we've done a summary of just picking out details from around the world.

[30 : 22] Some instances of people who suffer, who suffer because they are Christians. What can we do about it? First of all, let's know about it.

Don't let's turn a blind eye. Let's use every opportunity we have. It comes across in the newspapers, it comes across on our televisions.

Let's know about what is happening in the world. But there are also other organisations. Barnabas Fund, Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

There'll be literature as you leave. Please pick up some. Or look up these on the internet and get more information so that we know we are properly informed and use that information for prayer.

Let's use the prayer notes that we get from these organisations. Let's be systematic in prayer. Let's set aside certain times.

[31 : 28] Let's pray with others. If you do pray with others, why not make it something regular that you will bring in something about the persecuted church into your times of prayer together.

At family worship, in the prayer meetings, wherever, let's remember the persecuted church. There are other things that we can do and the literature will help you there.

It does make a difference. Writing to MPs, writing to ambassadors, writing to presidents, anybody can do it. You don't have to be important to write a letter to a president.

You can write or send cards of greetings to those who are in prison. And even if the cards do not get through to them, sometimes the prisoners don't actually receive these messages. But yet, they do help because they're oppressors, they're jailers, the officials there. They know that there are cards of support, messages of support, coming from all over the world.

[32 : 38] and that makes them think twice about what they do to the Christians in their prisons. But let us also remind ourselves, how would we fear if we were to face such persecution?

Really, we don't know. The Lord gives us the grace we need for what we are called on to face. That has been promised.

We've not been promised the courage of a martyr unless we're called on to be a martyr. But yet, we must stand firm for what the Lord calls us to be and calls us to do where we are.

Let us remember that there are things far worse than losing property. Let us remember there are things far worse than losing our lives.

That's what the courage of people in dangerous parts of the world remind us. To them, to live is Christ, to die is gain.

[33 : 58] There are spiritual dangers we face here that can be far more insidious and perhaps far more destructive than the open roaring of the lion as the devil goes about seeking whom he may devour.

And so perhaps, though the children have gone, we can come back to the swing. In what do you put your trust? trust? In whom do you put your trust?

Do you have a hope for today? Do you have a hope for tomorrow? Do you have a hope for beyond the grave? For the one who calls us to suffer for his name's sake is the one who has said, no one can snatch them out of my hand.

may the Lord bless that, these thoughts to us, and we'll turn to sing again. And in our last psalm, we will stand to sing, and it's Psalm 70 from the Scottish Psalter.

Lord, haste me to deliver, with speed, Lord, succor me, let them that for my soul do seek, shamed and confounded be, turned back be they, and shamed that in my heart delight, turned back be they, ha-ha, that say, their shaming to requite.

[35 : 43] We'll sing the whole of Psalm 70, we'll stand to sing and remain standing for prayer after we sing. Lord, haste me to deliver, praise thee, Lord, succor me, let them that for my soul so vulnerable sin take that of hounden be, the path they have seen at deeper quacked, and the harm about sin and shame to CHOIR SINGS

CHOIR SINGS In his impatience, in his godly impatience, cried, Lord, haste me to deliver.

Lord, deliver us from the wrong kind of impatience, but also, Lord, deliver us from the wrong kind of patience, where we tolerate within ourselves what we should not tolerate, where we wait for a more convenient season to deal with spiritual things that should be dealt with now.

Lord, deliver us from the wiles of the evil one. Deliver us from every attack that he makes on us.

And we pray, too, that you would deliver your people, even today, as they worship you, as we do, but they often having to worship in secret, not knowing when violent men will come through the door and take them away.

[38 : 56] Lord, we pray that you would be near to them this day. And may your grace, your mercy, and your peace be with us all, now and forevermore.

Amen. Amen.