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#1423

The Privilege of Persecution

Dr. Carl Moeller has just co-authored a book titled "The Privilege of Persecution." That might sound like a bit of an ostentatious title considering Dr. Moeller lives in Southern California where people aren't jailed and tortured for their faith.

But here's why he can write with authority on the subject. Moeller started his ministry in 1983 when he joined Campus Crusade for Christ International. There he worked with church leaders in eastern European communist countries. He said: "I discovered the Church was vitally alive despite decades of persecution and harassment from government officials. That really stoked my passion for suffering believers."

In 2003 Moeller was appointed president of Open Doors, an organization dedicated to bringing help to the millions who are suffering for their faith worldwide.
In his position with Open Doors He travels to the world's most oppressive regimes, meeting with and encouraging Christians who live in the shadows of discrimination, imprisonment and even death for their faith.

Actually, Dr. Moeller is more than qualified to speak on the subject.
So when he writes a book with a provocative title like "The Privilege of Persecution" it should peak our interest.

Here's what Moeller says we need to know:

There is a widely quoted statistic that more Christians died for their faith in the 20th century than in the 19 centuries leading up to it. But as bad as the 20th century was, the 21st century is starting to make that look like a Sunday picnic.

In every corner of the globe, Christians are being shot, burned, hanged, tortured and even stuffed into metal shipping containers. Christian clergy are being marked for assassination around the world, hundreds of churches are being burned to the ground along with scores of homes and businesses owned by Christians. Dozens of nations across the globe have now passed strict anti-conversion laws in an attempt to stifle the spread of Christianity. In the countries where Christians are not yet facing physical persecution, they still must deal with open discrimination, lawsuits and increasing ridicule. Christianity is now the most hated and most persecuted religion on the plant. The reality is that the words that Jesus spoke in John 15:18 ring truer today than ever: *If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you.*

Moeller goes on to argue that we who live in freedom can help strengthen and support our suffering brothers and sisters!

You might say, “Wow Ed, what could I ever do? How could I help someone facing such intense persecution?”

Today we’re participating in a world-wide event. It’s known as the International Day of Prayer For the Persecuted Church. Literally thousands and thousands of churches around the world are praying for the persecuted today.

Now FCC has always had a passion for missions. In our first service, 33 years ago we announced that we would take 10% of our income and start supporting a missionary family. That was back when our total offering averaged a little over $100 a week.

In 2010 God enabled us to give the equivalent of 35% of our general fund income to missions at home and around the world! Our goal is to someday make that 50%.

What I’d like to challenge you to think about this morning is, we have a lot more missionaries out there than just the ones listed on the back of our bulletin.

The ones on the back of our bulletin are near and dear to our hearts. We know their names, we read their letters, we share in their financial support, and pray for them. But, there’s other missionaries out there we’ll never met this side of eternity. They’re carrying the most important message in the world to cultures that desperately need it.

They’re faithfully sharing Christ, and many are paying an awful price.

What does the Bible say about persecution? Is there, as Carl Moeller would have us to believe, an upside to the horrible suffering that our brothers and sisters are going through? Is there such a thing as *The Privilege of Persecution?*

Imagine that you’re in prison. Some call it 'house arrest' because you are above ground. Not the usual stinking dungeon-like cells with musty, foul smells and hard-packed earthen floors. You are one of the lucky ones this time. You have a chain connecting you to a guard assigned to keep constant watch over you.

Though it’s a whole lot better than a pit, this prison hasn’t recently won the 'Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.' It’s dark. They like to keep you from seeing too much of the outdoors. So here you are, in a Roman prison. Can we ask you a few questions?

First let's ask, “Who are you?” because that makes what you did all the more intriguing.

You were born in Tarsus, the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia, around 5AD and given the name Saul. You were a citizen of Rome yet you were a Jew by birth.

You persecuted followers of Jesus Christ, then you came to a personal faith in Jesus while you were traveling on a road to Damascus. Later you changed your name to Paul, and became an Apostle of Jesus Christ.

When you became a follower of Jesus Christ, you faced real opposition. In a letter you wrote to a church in Greece you explain how bad things got.

Turn to 2 Corinthians 11 page 1139

Read verses 23b-27

So you were a zealous Jew named Saul of Tarsus. You suffered horrendous things. So how did you end up going through so much persecution and then land in jail? You must have done something very wrong, or illegal? Right?

Can people go to jail for doing what’s right? Paul would have answered “Yes!” In fact, the Bible is filled with accounts of godly people who ended up in chains for no other reason than their faith in God: Joseph, Jeremiah, Hanani, Micaiah, Daniel, John the Baptist, Peter, John, Silas, and Paul.

The thing to remember though is this, in virtually every case a significant spiritual event occurred with their imprisonment that in some way defeated the cause of Satan and advanced the Kingdom of God.

Now turn to Hebrews chapter 11 pg 1081

Hebrews 11 lists the heroes of the faith that God delivered from suffering...

Read verses 30-35a (through “again”)

Now notice what comes next: the word “others.” **Read verses 35b-38**

Here’s a list of nameless servants of God and followers of Jesus Christ that we’ll meet in Heaven someday.

Now look at Hebrews 13:3 Read

The operative word in verse 3 is "remember."

Over and over in scripture the Holy Spirit commands us to "remember" things because He knows we're so prone to forget.

In the 10 Commandments, God told Israel: *Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.* (Exodus 20:8)

After the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River, God commanded 12 stones be placed in the middle of the Jordan River to remind them to tell their children about the miracle of crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land.

Jesus told us celebrate communion in remembrance of Him until He comes. We're told so often in the Bible to remember because we're so prone to forget.

I believe that's why when Paul was in jail he told the Colossian Christians, *Remember my chains.* (Colossians 4:18) He knew that people forget. We live with an "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" mentality where only this moment counts. Reality is "now-here-today." We have a hard time thinking about anyone else, especially someone else in some other country who may be in prison.

So Paul, what's happened since you were locked in these chains? Why do you want people to remember your chains?

Three reasons: Here's where we get the Privilege of Persecution

I. Persecution Can Advance the Gospel

Turn to Philippians chapter 1 page 1151

Philippians is a letter Paul wrote to a church in Philippi, Macedonia while he was in prison in Rome.
Read verses 12-13

One pastor, in Turkey said, "Originally I went to jail for being bad and doing drugs. Now when I go to church on Sundays to preach, I prepare two sermons:
one for the people and one for the police. They come and arrest me and take me off to

jail and ask me, ‘What are you teaching the people?’”

“So I have a sermon all prepared that I share with the police! Now I go to jail willingly to share Jesus Christ. It has actually worked out well. We are getting to know many police, military and government officials and are able to 'build bridges' to them to tell them things about Jesus Christ and Christianity that they never knew before.”

Lalani, lives in Sri Lanka. Her husband was the pastor of a small house church. One evening he was stabbed to death by anti-Christians riled up by local Buddhist monks. In the US we have this false idea that Buddhism is a religion of peace.

Lalani would later describe the time her church building was bombed. She said, “We didn't pursue any suspicions with the police. They would only beat up the suspect, which would bring more resentment.” Contributions came in from throughout Sri Lanka and the church was able to complete construction on the new building. Opposition seemed to die out with that.

Lalani now counts 1,200 believers where once there were none. Seven house churches have been started in the area. Her denomination put her in charge of the whole southern region of Sri Lanka.
Her vision had been for 150,000 people in and around her town. “Now I'm praying for revival in the whole area!”

Paul wrote: *...it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ...*

The word translated “palace guard” is *praitorion*. The praetorian guard was Caesar’s own personal body guards. Paul was chained to guards 24/7 in rotating shifts. Because his witness to them, the message of Jesus Christ was getting right into Caesar’s household.

Read Philippians 4:22

Think about this: Prayer for persecuted Christians is a missionary endeavor. A Voice of the Martyrs recent newsletter article says: “When VOM workers travel in restricted countries, they often ask evangelists what they can pray for. These evangelists do not have big houses or much money.”

“They have few clothes and little food. Under these conditions, what do they ask for? They ask that we pray that they will remain faithful to God. Their whole ministry

depends on this."

No one likes to suffer. No one chooses to be persecuted. But some of our persecuted brethren are asking us to pray that they'd remain faithful,

…not that the persecution would stop, because they see how God is expanding His church as persecution has grown.

Pastor Samuel Lamb spent 20 years in various Chinese prisons for his evangelistic activities.

He said, "Before I was arrested, my church had only 200 members. After I was released from prison the first time, I found the church had grown to 900 members. Then came the confiscation of books and equipment. After the confiscation the church had grown to 2000 members. Persecution has been good for the church."

It's hard to get an exact count, but by the best estimates there was one million Christians in China in 1970 (which was a sharp decline from earlier in the twentieth century because of Communist repression). Today there's about 120 million Christians, with some 70 million in unregistered churches.

I. Persecution Can Advance the Gospel
II. Persecution Can Make People Bolder in Sharing Their Faith

Turn back to Philippians 1:14 (Page 1151) <u>Read</u>

Not only did Paul's imprisonment give him the opportunity to share his faith but it made other believers start to think.
They figured, "Hey, if Paul can speak out for Jesus in jail, we can do it as free people."

See, if Paul were just sitting in his cell defeated, discouraged, depressed, and despairing, the other Christians would be tempted to keep their mouths shut. If the Apostle had given up there wouldn't have been a mass movement to follow in his footsteps.

But, when Paul triumphed in his situation other Christians caught the vision.

A Russian believer said: "The persecuted church has more fire and energy to evangelize. After the fall of Communism it was open in Russia to share the Gospel. But I led more people to become followers of Jesus Christ during my 18 years in the 'underground' church than I have in those few subsequent years of freedom."

The government of Laos identifies Christianity as "the number one enemy of the state."

It accuses Christians of undermining Laotian culture, national unity, and the traditional dominance of Buddhism, which reinforces existing social power structures.

The government started a drive, called "The Program," that aims to eliminate all Christianity in Laos and close all Christian places of worship in the countryside. What's happening though is this; the local people are saying, "There must be something to this if the government is taking such a strong stand against it. It must be right."

Laotian Christians say, "We've seen people grow stronger in the midst of persecution. Once they've been refined by it, their faith is just so strong."

For years, very little information about the church emerged from North Korea regime, which is now ruled by the guy for whom every day is a bad hair day, Kim Jong Il (who's official title is The Eternal President of the Republic).

For years we wondered if the church had survived the decades of severe oppression. Recently, because of starvation and harsh conditions, a flood of information has come from North Korean refugees fleeing to China. They report that the church has not only survived, but even grown, perhaps to 400,000 Christians who worship in secret.

To practice the Christian faith in North Korea today can result in imprisonment and death. There are 8 known reeducation camps in North Korea. Some of the conditions rival the Nazi death camps for torture and cruelty.

Terry Madison writes, "Imagine how nearly impossible it is for Christians to survive, and the Christian faith to grow in North Korea as it again ranks first in the 'hall of shame' of countries repressing the free expression of Christianity.

And yet, despite its cruel punishment and death to believers, indications are that the Church in North Korea continues to grow despite the best efforts of the government to destroy the Church."

I. Persecution Can Advance the Gospel
II. Persecution Can Make People Bolder in Sharing Their Faith
III. Persecution Can Cause More People to Pray

The more we're aware of persecution world-wide, the more we'll be energized to pray.

The more we pray, the more we participate in God's missionary outreach.

We may not be able to go to some of the most difficult places but in so many areas of the world God already has His people. They face opposition far beyond anything we could ever imagine. Some stand strong, but not all. A lot of them are fearful and anxious and you can understand why. Many out of concern for the safety of their own children have renounced their faith.

We talk about "The War on Christmas," and repressive legislation in this country as if we were suffering persecution.

Ma Yuquin allowed a church to meet in her home in a remote province in China. The Chinese Public Security Bureau arrested her along with her son. She was tortured with beatings and electrical shocks.

Physically that was almost unbearable. But to add to her anguish, they tortured her son in the next room, so mother and son could hear each other's screams.

200 million precious Christians need our prayers. They need to know the strength *and protection of God. Those who have denied Him under pressure need to realize* that God hasn't stopped loving them. He, more than anyone else, knows their terrors and knows their weaknesses.

Why does Ma Yuquin, Lalani, the Christians of North Korea, Laos, Cuba, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Vietnam, Egypt, Bhutan, and scores of other countries risk it all? Why don't they just keep quiet about their faith?

According to the U.S. State Department, there isn't a single, public Christian church left in Afghanistan. More than 1,700 U.S. military personnel have died serving in that country. U.S. taxpayers have spent $440 billion to support Afghanistan's new government and the last public Christian church in Afghanistan was demolished in March 2010. According to the State Department's latest International Religious Freedom Report "there were no Christian schools left in the country."

Yet the few Afghani Christians struggle to be true to the faith. Why?

Because they believe the Bible when it says: *the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*. (Romans 6:23)

Because they know that: *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*. (John 3:16)

They take seriously the Scripture *He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.* (John 3:18)

They risk it all because God has forgiven them through Jesus Christ and they have a passion to honor God by bring the message of salvation to as many people as possible including their persecutors.

So what are we to do? Obviously we're not going to rid the world of all injustices single-handedly. We can't personally bring in the kingdom of God and universal peace. But just because we can't do everything doesn't mean we can't do something.

What can we do? For one thing, we can be informed.

If we're not aware of the atrocities that are abounding against churches, it is not because there is a lack of information about it.

You usually have to read past the front page of the Washington Post to find it, but the stories are out there. The literature and the reports and the documentation is available. Just Google "Persecuted Church" and you can find up-to-the-minute prayer items and news reports.

A few weeks ago Open Doors USA commissioned a survey by Barna Research Associates asking American pastors if they planned on preaching on the Persecuted Church. Fifty percent said no, they wouldn't talk about the subject. May God have mercy on us.

Then, once we're informed we can pray.

Craig Barnes, pastor of the The National Presbyterian Church in DC, was interviewed by a reporter for the radio about The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. He writes, she asked me, "What do you really hope to accomplish by today's service?" I knew she was expecting me to call for political solutions. But I said, "You know, when people pray for persecuted Christians, we are placing them in the hands of God, and there is nothing we will do that is more powerful than that." At that point the interview came to an abrupt conclusion, and I remembered that their ways are not our ways."

Remember the prisoners as if chained with them--those who are mistreated--since you yourselves are in the body also. (Hebrews 13:3)