



## **Blessed Are The Persecuted**

Text: Matthew 5:10-17

Care and Missions Pastor Dan Slagle

1. Who comes to mind as an example of someone who persevered in the face of trial and persecution because of their faith in Christ? What is it that stands out to you about their testimony?
2. Read Matthew 5:10-12.
  - a. Summarize in your own words what Jesus' definition of persecution is in Matthew 5:10-11.
  - b. Look at your own life. Can you say that you have truly experienced persecution for righteousness' sake or because of your commitment to Christ? If yes, describe that experience. If not, why do you think that is?
  - c. How have you let fear of being persecuted keep you from complete surrender and obedience to Christ? (e.g. Do you let fear keep you from sharing your faith with others?)
  - d. Each of the Beatitudes leads to a Blessed life because there is a specific promise associated with each one. What is promised to those who are persecuted? What does this mean?
  - e. Compared to much of the world throughout history, most of us have not experienced true persecution. While there is much to be thankful for about this, it is not without its dangers. Namely, our relative comfort can cause us to sink into apathy. How have you seen this to be true in your life?
  - f. What would it take for you to "wake up" and live for the kingdom of God, rather than the kingdom of this world?
  - g. How do the promises within these verses inspire you and encourage you to live a bolder life for Christ?
3. Read Matthew 5:13-16.
  - a. What do you think it means to be salt and light?
  - b. What is the connection between the 8 Beatitudes we have been studying throughout the Blessed series and being salt and light?
  - c. What results would we see in the world if the church embraced its mission as salt and light?
4. Suffering is a theme that runs throughout the New Testament. Meditate on the following passages and write down reflections from what the Spirit reveals to you.
  - a. Luke 9:23-27
  - b. Romans 8:18-39
  - c. 2 Corinthians 4:5-18
  - d. James 1:2-4
  - e. 1 Peter 1:3-9

**Challenge:** Pray for each one of the “Ten Most Dangerous Places to be a Christian.” (See Study Deeper.) Pick one country per day. Read the information about the danger being a follower of Christ poses to people in that country. And use what you learn to guide your prayer time for believers in that country.

**Prayer:** Conclude your group time by praying out loud through the following prayer for persecuted Christians together.

*“Sovereign God, we worship You and we acknowledge that You know all of those who suffer in Your name.*

*We remember those who are imprisoned for their faith and ask that they would join with the Apostle Paul to see that even though they remain captive, their chains have furthered the gospel, not frustrated it.*

*May they inspire and embolden their fellow believers to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.*

*God of all comfort, for those who are tortured both in body and mind, give them the grace to endure and to see their suffering as part of following in Christ’s footsteps.*

*Merciful God, for those asked to pay the ultimate price; who are martyred because of their love for You, may they truly know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death.*

*Father God, for those who are widowed and orphaned may they know the comfort that comes from Your promised presence even when they walk through the valley.*

*May they be strengthened by Your Spirit, enabling them to rejoice with the psalmist as they proclaim that the Lord will not abandon them in death.*

*Heavenly Father, we ask that You would make us ever mindful of our brothers and sisters around the world who need us to stand with them as they suffer in Your name.*

*Teach us what it means to overcome by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of our testimony; we pray that we would not love our lives so much as to shrink from death. O Lord, hear our prayer.”*

From: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/a-prayer-for-persecuted-christians/>

## **STUDY DEEPER**

### **The Ten Most Dangerous Places to be a Christian**

A new report from Open Doors reveals a stark reality for 245 million Christians.

The Christian persecution we read about in Scripture is not a thing of the past. It still exists. And today, in the 21st century, we are living in a time when persecution against Christian believers is the highest in modern history. In the world's two most-populous countries, China and India, Christianity is under attack. In China, Christians have been arrested and churches shuttered. In India, Christians are arrested, physically attacked and even killed.

A new report from Open Doors reveals that more than 245 million Christians endure high, very high or extreme persecution in the top 50 countries where it's most dangerous to follow Jesus. According to Open Doors' 2019 World Watch List—an in-depth investigative report focusing on global Christian persecution—persecution is increasing at an alarming rate. That number is up this year from last year's total of 215 million. Below, we look at the world's 10 most dangerous places to be a Christian—countries where saying “yes” to following Jesus is truly a life-or-death decision.

#### **1. North Korea Ranks No. 1 for 18th Consecutive Year on World Watch List**

For three generations, everything in this isolated country has focused on idolizing the leading Kim family. Christians are seen as hostile elements in society that must be eradicated. There was hope that new diplomatic efforts in 2018—including the 2018 Winter Olympics—would mean a lessening of pressure and violence against Christians. But so far that has not been the case. In fact, reports indicate that local authorities are increasing incentives for anyone who exposes a Christian in their community.

If Christians are discovered, not only are they deported to labor camps or even killed on the spot, their families to the fourth generation share their fate as well. Communal worship is non-existent. Daring to meet other Christians for worship is a risky feat that must be done in utmost secrecy. Yet Open Doors estimates the number of Christians in North Korea to be 300,000 strong—believers who are defying the unjust regime and following Jesus.

#### **2. Afghanistan—Where Christianity Is Not Permitted to Exist**

Afghanistan is once again a close second behind North Korea on the 2019 World Watch List. An Islamic state by constitution, the country does not permit any faith other than Islam to exist. To convert to a faith outside Islam is tantamount to treason because it's seen as a betrayal of family, tribe and country. Very often, there is only one possible outcome for exposed and caught Christians: death.

In Afghanistan converts are considered literally insane to leave Islam. As a result, some may end up in a psychiatric hospital and have their homes destroyed. In addition to communal pressure, the security situation continues to deteriorate due to the influx of foreign militants who have pledged allegiance to ISIS. And the radical Islamic Taliban have also increased in strength; at least half of Afghanistan's 34 provinces are either ruled or contested by the Taliban. Afghan Christians (mostly those with a Muslim background) are in hiding as much as possible.

### **3. Christians Are High-Value Targets in Somalia**

Estimates suggest that 99 percent of Somalis are Muslims, and any minority religions are heavily persecuted. The Christian community is small and under constant threat of attack. In fact, persecution of Christians almost always involves violence. Additionally, in many rural areas, Islamic militant groups like al-Shabab are de facto rulers who regard Christians with a Muslim background as high-value targets—often killed on the spot when discovered.

In recent years, the situation appears to have worsened. Islamic militants have intensified their hunt for people who are Christian and in a position of leadership. An attempt to reopen a church in Hargeisa, Somaliland, failed; the government was forced to shut it down due to pressure from the local Islamic population. In the World Watch List 2019 reporting period, Christians in Somalia remained so vulnerable to attacks by Islamic militants that in the interests of security, Open Doors could publish no specific examples of persecution.

### **4. Believers in Libya Face Deadly Violence from Extremists**

After the ouster of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi, Libya plunged into chaos and anarchy, which has enabled various Islamic militant groups to control parts of the country. Libyan converts to Christianity face abuse and violence for their decision to follow Christ. The country is also home to many migrant workers who have been attacked, sexually assaulted and detained, which can be even worse if your Christian faith is discovered.

Libyan Christians with a Muslim background face extremely violent and intense pressure from their family and the wider community to renounce their faith. Believers from other parts of the continent are also targeted by various Islamic militant groups and organized criminal groups. Few will forget the horrifying video of Egyptian workers martyred by ISIS militants on the coast of Libya. The level of violence against Christians in Libya is very high, and Christians in Libya are subjected to violent, inhumane and degrading treatment.

### **5. Christians in Pakistan Live With Open Discrimination and Constant Threat of Mob Attacks**

Under Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws, Christians continue to live in daily fear they will be accused of blasphemy—which can carry a death sentence. The most well-known example of these laws is the case of Asia Bibi. After sitting on death row for more than 10 years, the Christian wife and mother was acquitted of blasphemy charges in October; however her life is still in grave danger from radical Islamists that have gained increasing political power in the world's sixth-largest country. For that reason, the new ruling government must maintain good diplomatic relationships with some radical groups.

In Pakistan, Christians are largely regarded as second-class citizens, and conversion to Christianity from Islam carries a great deal of risk. An estimated 700 girls and women abducted each year are often raped and then forcefully married to Muslim men in the community, usually resulting in forced conversions. While traditional, historical churches have relative freedom for worship, they are heavily monitored and have regularly been targeted for bomb attacks (for example, the Quetta attack in December 2017 on Bethel Memorial Methodist Church).

All Christians suffer from institutionalized discrimination. Occupations seen as low, dirty and derogatory are officially reserved for Christians. Many Christians are very poor, and some are victims of bonded labor.

On the other hand, many Christians belong to Pakistan's middle class; however, this does not save them from being marginalized or persecuted.

### **6. Christian Converts in Sudan Targeted for Persecution**

Sudan has been ruled as an Islamic state by the authoritarian government of President al-Bashir since 1989. Under his charge, the country offers limited rights for religious minorities and places heavy restrictions on freedom of speech or press. The last year has been difficult for Christians in many ways. There have been arrests; many churches have been demolished and others are on an official list awaiting demolition. And many Christians are attacked indiscriminately in areas like the Nuba Mountains where there is an ongoing conflict between government forces and rebel groups.

Christian converts from Islam are especially targeted for persecution. So to keep from being discovered, converts will often refrain from raising their children as Christians because this might attract the attention of the government and community leaders (since children might inadvertently reveal their parents' faith).

### **7. Christians Imprisoned in Shipping Containers in Eritrea**

Since 1993, President Afwerki has overseen an authoritarian brutal regime that rests on massive human rights violations. During the 2019 World Watch List reporting period, government security forces conducted many house-to-house raids and imprisoned hundreds of Christians in inhumane conditions, including small shipping containers in scorching heat. Protestants, in particular, face serious problems in accessing community resources, especially social services provided by the State.

Christians from non-traditional church groups, such as evangelicals, face the harshest persecution. In 2018, Eritrea embraced an end to hostility with both Ethiopia and Somalia. How that agreement will play out for the situation of Christians remains to be seen. This extreme pressure and state-sanctioned violence are forcing some Christians to flee Eritrea—often called “Africa's North Korea”—and seek asylum.

### **8. Believers in Yemen Especially Vulnerable in Civil War and Famine**

The ongoing civil war in Yemen has created one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent memory, making an already difficult nation for Christians to live in even harder. The chaos of war has enabled radical groups to take control over some regions of Yemen, and they have increased persecution of Christians. Even private worship is risky in some parts of the country.

Christians are suffering from the general humanitarian crisis in the country, but Yemeni Christians are additionally vulnerable since emergency relief is mostly distributed through Islamic organizations and local mosques, which are allegedly discriminating against all who are not considered to be pious Muslims. Converts to Christianity from Islam face additional persecution from family and society.

In Yemen, the small church is composed mostly of Yemeni Christians with a Muslim background who must live their faith in secret. They face persecution from the authorities (including detention and interrogation), their families, and radical Islamic groups who threaten converts with death if they don't denounce Christ and re-convert.

## **9. Illegal to Convert, Illegal to Preach in Iran**

In this gateway to the Middle East, Christians are forbidden from sharing their faith with non-Christians. Therefore, church services in Persian, the national language, are not allowed. Converts from Islam undergo persecution from the government; if they attend an underground house church, they face the constant threat of arrest. Iranian society is governed by Islamic law, which means the rights and job possibilities for Christians are heavily restricted. The government sees them as an attempt by Western countries to undermine Islam and the Islamic regime of Iran. Leaders of groups of Christian converts have been arrested, prosecuted and have received long prison sentences for “crimes against the national security.”

In December, to crack down on Christians sharing their faith, Iranian police arrested 100 Christians in one week, making a blatant statement to both Christians and Muslims. Iran is also infamous for its prisons and inhumane treatment of Christians in places like Evin Prison where well-known house church pastor Yousef Nardarkhani is serving a 10-year sentence.

## **10. Unprecedented Christian Persecution in India**

In the world’s second-most populous country, Christians saw unprecedented persecution on numerous fronts from both the State and general Hindu society. For the first time, India enters the top 10 on the World Watch List, jumping one spot from No. 11 in 2018. Home to more than a billion people, even an incremental rise in persecution yields an exponential impact. Since the current ruling party took power in 2014, Hindu extremists have fueled a crackdown on Christian house churches and have attacked believers with impunity—believing that to be Indian is to be Hindu. So any other faith is viewed as non-Indian.

In rural areas, Christians were told that one church would be closed down every week because they have been “destroying” local tradition and culture by “luring” others to convert to Christianity. And it is common for Christians to be cut off from local water supplies and be denied access to government-subsidized groceries. In India, saying “yes” to Jesus has become a risky decision that costs you and your family greatly.

<https://radical.net/the-ten-most-dangerous-places-to-be-a-christian/>