

## “TORTURED FOR JESUS”

2 Timothy 3:10-12

### INTRODUCTION

1. Most of us don't have a clue. We really don't know much about what is happening around the world.

When we came to this room today, some of us probably had conversations about the Cleveland Cavaliers' recent winning streak and how well LeBron James and Shaquille O'Neal are playing. But a headline just a few weeks ago read,

***“North Korea Executes Christian for Distributing Bible.”***

Some of us probably talked to each other about our plans to see family members at Thanksgiving. And a recent headline read,

***“Christian Pastor Executed in Iran.”***

Some of us wonder what we'll get each other for Christmas, while last year a headline in Indonesia read:

***“Bomb Squads Search Churches Before Christmas Eve Services.”***

In more than 60 countries around the world, 200 million followers of Jesus face persecution for their faith. The countries highlighted in red on the map are places where Christians experience persecution today because of government policies. The countries highlighted in black on the map are places where Christians will experience persecution even though there is some religious liberty in those countries.

Eg. In Sudan, Christian boys and girls are sold into slavery; Christian women are raped; Christian men are beaten, tortured, and in some cases crucified.

Eg. In China, perhaps as many as 100 million people are followers of Jesus Christ – and at least half of those live in fear of being found out and sent to forced labor camps.

In Iran, evangelical Christians are targeted because they dare to share their faith with Muslims.

We could talk about North Korea, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.

Eg. It's no wonder that John Hanford, a former aide to Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, said:

*“On a world-wide basis, Christians are the most persecuted major religion in terms of direct punishment for practicing religious activities – public worship, evangelism, and charity.”*

It's no wonder many believe that more Christians died for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century than all other periods of church history combined.

So what are we supposed to think about all this, any way? It's easy to think, *“Well it doesn't have anything to do with me. Why should I worry about it? Why should I even be concerned?”* We want to answer those questions this morning.

If you have a copy of the Scriptures, let me invite you to turn to the Book of 2 Timothy, chapter 3.

When you read the Bible, you discover a spiritual conflict that exists in our world between God Himself and

the forces of the Evil One. We shouldn't be surprised to discover that this spiritual conflict impacts everyone of us whether we realize it or not.

So today, we turn our attention to four insights that help us know how to respond when we encounter spiritual opposition. These are four insights that will help us address the needs of Christians around the world who are experiencing persecution. When it comes to the subject of spiritual opposition in the world, I must...

## 1. REALIZE IT'S INEVITABLE

Look at what Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy, chapter 3:

*“You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured.*

*Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).*

Paul said it like this to the Thessalonians:

*“...When we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know” (1 Thessalonians 3:4b).*

Do you understand what persecution really is? Maybe it's easier to describe what it doesn't mean. Persecution is not suffering because of my crude behavior. People who are offensive in their behavior eventually suffer for it. If you don't use deodorant, don't claim “persecution” because nobody wants to sit next to you. If you're rude to your

employees or disrespectful to your boss, don't be surprised if you get fired. That's not persecution.

Paul is also **not** referring to people who suffer because they're lazy, or they don't work hard, or they criticize others, or they bend the rules, or because they don't do a good job. Folks, that's not persecution.

Eg. A man named, Clarence Jordan, said it like this:

*“It's difficult to be indifferent to a wide-awake Christian. Wide-awake Christians confront others with the reality of God. You can't be neutral in such cases. These people...are either mighty right or mighty wrong.”*

Folks, that's right...and that's what breeds persecution. It's one of the reasons why early disciples of Jesus were persecuted. Did you know, for instance, that James was beheaded, Philip was crucified, Matthew was executed by the sword, Andrew was crucified, Peter was crucified upside down, Paul was beheaded by Nero in Rome, Bartholomew was beaten to death, Thomas was speared to death, Simon the Zealot was crucified, and the Apostle John died in exile on an island called, Patmos?

You see, this shouldn't surprise us. Jesus warned His followers to expect persecution. He said it like this in John 15:

*“...If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also...” (John 15:20b).*

That is happening all over the world today.

There is a second insight that will help me know how to respond to persecution in our world. I must...

## 2. RELLECT THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

One of the first Christ-followers who were martyred was a man named Stephen. The Bible tells us he was stoned to death because of his commitment to honor Christ. We read these words in Acts:

*“While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he fell asleep”*  
(Acts 7:59, 60).

If those words sound familiar to you, it’s because Jesus made this statement when He was hanging on the cross:

*“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34).

Eg. When Stephen died, the Bible says his murderers laid their coats at the feet of a man named, Saul. Saul never forgot the love he saw in the eyes of Stephen. Apparently, that changed his life and eventually Saul became a follower of Jesus Christ and the greatest missionary the world has ever known.

Eg. During the Reformation in Great Britain, Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, converted to Christianity. Latimer became known as a great preacher and Ridley helped write the Book of Common Prayer.

Because of their faith, both men were arrested and condemned to be burned at the stake. As the flames were being lit, Latimer cried, *“Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, we shall this day light such a candle by God’s grace in England as shall never be put out.”* And then the flames consumed their bodies.

Thomas Cranmer watched both those men die in agony. At one time, he had been the Archbishop of Canterbury, but later recanted his faith because of opposition. When he watched those two men die, it restored spiritual strength to his soul. A few months later, he was condemned to death. They lit the flames to burn Cranmer at the stake; he put his right hand into the fire to show that he was not afraid to die.

During the days of the early Church, the Romans tried to stamp out Christianity. Thousands of Christians died for their faith in those early years. An early church leader named, Tertullian, observed that every time the Church was persecuted, it seemed to grow faster. He made this famous statement, *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”*

Do you know why? When the love of Christ is seen in a time of persecution, it can’t be ignored. People want to know what’s going on in our lives.

If I’m going to respond to the persecution that’s happening in the world, I must realize it’s inevitable...reflect the imitation of Christ...and then I must...

### **3. REJOICE IN THE INHERITANCE AHEAD**

Jesus made an incredible statement in what we usually call the *“Sermon on the Mount.”* At the end of the section we call, “The Beatitudes,” He said it like this:

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.*

*Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Acts 7:59,60).*

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus said:

*“But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).*

Eg. The late Adrian Rogers said it like this:

*“Life is represented in three levels: the “hellish” level, the “human” level, and the “heavenly” level. The “hellish” level is when good people are persecuted by bad people for doing good. The “human” level is returning good for good and evil for evil. But there is a third level of living that should characterize those who are followers of Christ. It’s the “heavenly” level. It’s returning good for evil. It’s doing good to people when they do bad to us. “*

Eg. Recently, I learned about a book by an old Methodist preacher called, *Some Dogs I Have Known*. He said one day he walked through town and saw one of those massive bulldogs with the huge shoulders and the tiny hind legs. As he walked down the street, he saw a feisty little dog jump out of a yard and begin to yip ferociously at the big bulldog.

Do you know what that bulldog did? Nothing. He just kept walking down the street and never looked back. That bull dog could have snapped up the smaller dog, broken him in half, and eaten him for breakfast, but he didn’t do it. He just walked on and never looked back.

The old Methodist preacher went home and wrote this prayer:

*“O God, whatever that bulldog’s got, I want. I want the ability to walk straight ahead, and let the rest yip and snarl and growl to their hearts content. God give us men whom the acclaim or howling threats of the multitude do not move...men who walk amid criticism, condemnation, and cursings...men whose ears are too close to heaven to hear the little growls from the throats of the worm-like things of earth.”*

I think that’s some of what Jesus had in mind when He said:

*“Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven...”*

I love what Peter wrote in his little Epistle:

*“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold...*

*.. which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when **Jesus Christ is revealed**” (1 Peter 1:6, 7).*

That what it means to rejoice in what’s ahead!

If I’m going to respond to persecution that’s present in the world, there is one more thing I need to do. I must...

#### 4. REMEMBER TO GET INFORMED AND PRAY

Look at what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 3:

*“Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was*

*with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith” (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2).*

Eg. Some of you might remember the story of Heather Mercer. Heather was an American missionary to Afghanistan who was arrested and tried by the Taliban for sharing her faith. Eventually she was freed by anti-Taliban forces and rescued. She knows the power of prayer. She said it like this:

*“You might have the best political forces available to you, but sometimes that’s not enough. Prayer can move things in the heavenlies and hold back darkness in a way that nothing else can. Prayer is not only a way to get behind persecuted Christians, but it’s a must.” --Heather Mercer*

Paul said it like this to the Corinthians:

*“He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and He will deliver us. On Him we have set our hope that He will continue to deliver us, as you **help us by your prayers**” (2 Corinthians 1:10-11a).*

We could spend the rest of our time this morning reminding ourselves of what is happening around the world.

Eg. Just a couple of years ago, three Christian high school girls were beheaded as a trophy during Ramadan by Muslim militants from Indonesia. The girls’ severed heads were dumped in plastic bags in their home village, along with a handwritten note threatening more attacks.

The note simply read:

*“Wanted: One hundred more Christian heads, teenagers or adults, male or female...”*

I know of only one response to that and that’s to get informed and pray. I’ve listed at the bottom of your outline a couple of websites that will help you stay informed about what is happening around the world. Those websites provide information about how to communicate to our political leaders concerning those who are in danger for the cause of Christ. You can stop at the table in the lobby to learn more about how to communicate with those in prison.

## CONCLUSION

1. Would you agree today that comfort is something that most of us appreciate? It’s even something we seek, right? Sometimes we’ll pay a lot of money in order to be comfortable.

We buy comfortable shoes. We want comfortable clothing. We buy comfortable chairs where we relax in our comfortable homes. We make decisions about what automobiles to drive based on comfort. We work in comfortable offices, and shop in comfortable grocery stores. Sadly, even our faith in Jesus can get comfortable. Jesus Christ was willing to become uncomfortable for all of us. He looked down through history and saw all of the wrongdoing we would ever commit and still chose to be rejected and crucified so we could experience God’s forgiveness.

In fact, the Christmas season is a reminder that Jesus was willing to be uncomfortable so we could experience all God has for us.

I want you to know God did not enter this world to rescue us from our sin so we just might be more comfortable. He invites us to follow Him wholeheartedly.

He invites us to live lives of faith, based on what He's done for us.

I want to ask you...

- What you are willing to risk for Him.