THE VICTORIOUS CHURCH, THRIVING IN PERSECUTION
Why the suffering of God’s Church shows the victory of Christ.

The Bible has a lot to say about how the world will treat the disciples of Jesus. “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you,” He says in John 15:18 (ESV). Most of us have never experienced that kind of hate, and certainly not for our beliefs! God’s Word shows us that persecution has been a part of His story throughout history. God’s prophets and Jesus’ disciples were persecuted, and the story of the early Church in the New Testament is the story of persecution come to life for God’s people. If you look at Scripture, it’s written largely by persecuted believers, written for persecuted believers, and written to give instruction on how to walk with God in often unthinkable situations.

Persecution reminds us of the truth of the gospel: Following God has never been about us. It has always been about Him.

And so, is it possible God allows persecution to show us that what we think of as “The Persecuted Church” is, in fact, “The Victorious Church?” Around the world, we see church buildings burned to the ground. We hear of our sisters and brothers hassled, cast aside, jailed, beaten and even killed. But in the same stories, we hear the hope of God’s goodness, and of miraculous love in action. We hear about radical love and a faith that won’t die.

Is this what The Victorious Church looks like?

The following sermon is designed to help you lead your church in a meditation about The Victorious Church. There is a basic outline along with Scripture passages for you to leverage as you build your own sermon. We hope this is a helpful resource as you lead your congregation from worry and hopelessness to the realization that the victory is already won—and that victory shows in little points of light throughout the world, every day.

INTRODUCTION

What comes to mind when you hear of “the Persecuted Church”?

Possible answers might include:

+ Violence
+ Sadness
+ Suffering
+ Pity
+ Anger
+ Prayer
+ Thankfulness for the freedom we enjoy
In the book of Nehemiah, we're given an example of how to respond when the family of God is having tough times.

+ Background on Nehemiah
  • He was one of God's people in exile in Babylon
  • He was cupbearer to the king
  • He saw travelers from the homeland of Israel; told him how terrible things are
  • Nehemiah and Ezra take place at the same time, and inform each other. Ezra starts the story of God's people returning home to rebuild, but they are forced to stop and then commit many sins. Nehemiah picks up after some of these rebuilders return to Babylon and tell him that the rebuilding process is at a standstill.

+ Neh. 1:4, "As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

+ Nehemiah's actions:
  • immediate response
  • cried and mourned
  • fasted and prayed

+ The rest of Nehemiah's story: He acted!

We can also see Jesus’ perspective on persecution in the Book of Revelation:

When talking about the persecuted church, we can be thankful for Jesus’ words, commending the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7-11:

Rev 3:8 (ESV), “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”

Philadelphia was a place during John's time where the Church was going through brutal persecution. But Jesus assured they were weren't suffering in vain—and their pain wasn't escaping His notice.

Imagine hearing from Jesus:

“No one can close the door I have opened for you"

“You have kept my word”

“You have not denied my name”

VICTORY

As we read stories from our persecuted family, we come to see these are stories of The Victorious Church.

Now we might be scratching your head and wondering, “What? This is what victory looks like? This is not what I signed up for!” But:
Yes, this is what victory looks like.

Yes, this is what we believers signed up for.

It may not be popular in many churches to talk about Jesus’ words on the cost of discipleship—about denying yourself, taking up your cross daily (Luke 14:25-33), about presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1).

We know that all God’s Word is profitable to us (2 Tim 3:16). It was then, it is now and it will be tomorrow.

Let’s look at some examples of this Victorious Church I’m talking about:

**North Korea**

- Number 1 on the World Watch List of countries that persecute Christians. What’s it like being a Christian in North Korea?
  - Picture a professional football stadium for the big game on Sunday, filled to capacity. That’s roughly the number of Christians in labor camps in North Korea. Their crime? Believing in Jesus.
  - There are no parents in North Korea reading Bible stories to their young children. They simply can’t afford to for fear that the child may say something and reveal their beliefs.
  - Christian fellowship looks much different in North Korea. There can be no worship services. There can be no gathering. It might look like this: picture a Christian walking into a park and taking a seat on a bench. And then over some period of time, scanning the park to see if maybe there’s another believer to visit with for a moment.
  - And yet … Open Doors estimates there are 300,000 believers in North Korea. They’re worshiping God wherever and however they can. They are ready to preach the gospel. They are continuing to follow God, no matter the cost.

**Pakistan**

- Number 5 on the World Watch List of the worst persecutors of Christians.
- Ambiguous blasphemy laws have been put in place, which can be used to throw any Christian in jail for a real or perceived slight against Islam. Any accuser can claim something derogatory was said about Islam or Muhammad, and the person accused can be arrested and sentenced to death. Often, the accusation is accompanied by a group of people eager to administer mob justice.
- As of this writing, Asia Bibi is likely the most notable of persecuted Pakistani Christians accused of blasphemy. She is a mother of five who has been imprisoned since 2009 and on death row since 2010, for her alleged blasphemy. It all started because she got a drink of water from a well that is used by Muslim women. She is isolated in prison, prepared her own meals, cleans her own cell, and avoids all contact with other prisoners, for fear of her life.
- Pakistani children are educated in thousands of madrasas—Islamic schools—where they are often exposed to extremist messages and ideology. Additionally, women and children are abducted at an alarming rate; perhaps 700 of them last year, with some of them sexual abused, forcefully married to Muslim men and forced to convert to Islam.
- But the hope of Christ is visible even in this context of persecution. Christians are standing for Jesus, regardless of the cost, and are ministering and preaching the gospel. People who have born into Christian families who have never had
the chance to go to church are hearing God's word for the first time!

- **Eritrea**
  - Number 6 on the World Watch list.
  - Eritrea is one of the most closed countries in the world. It's often called the “North Korea of Africa” because of its brutal dictatorship.
  - No church operates without government direction. There is no evangelical presence, at least not publicly. Even with the supposedly “allowed” churches, the government can depose of its leaders, as it did with the head of the Orthodox church in 2007.
  - There may be more than 1,000 Christians imprisoned in metal shipping containers that function as prisons. Eritrea has a vast network of prisons, and often Christians can languish in these brutal conditions for years.
  - Eritreans of all religions are leaving their country. A staggering number of Eritreans flee their nation to surrounding countries or to Europe.
  - But Christians aren’t hopeless. Even Christians who have had to flee are hoping to one day return to Eritrea and help restore the church. One Christian in a nearby country told Open Doors researchers: “I believe the Church will be a strong power to change society, play its part in development. We want to evangelize the many unreached ethnic groups, train good pastors that can lead the church, defend the faith, influence society with Biblical worldview and values.”

- **Nigeria**
  - Number 14 on the World Watch List.
  - In recent years, it was Boko Haram, a militant Muslim group that was the primary force attacking and killing Christians, particularly in the Northeast corner of Nigeria. Since the beginning of their insurgency in 2009, Boko Haram is responsible for at least tens of thousands of deaths, and over 2 million people were displaced through the destruction of their communities. One of the most public atrocities was the kidnapping of 276 school girls in 2014. As of early 2018, 112 of these girls have yet to come home.
  - Most recently it is the militant Muslim Fulani herders who have been attacking and killing Christians. In Nigeria’s Middle Belt, which divides the mostly-Muslim north from the mostly-Christian south, there is a long-standing conflict between the Fulani, many of whom are nomadic herders, and Christians, who tend to be farmers. The Fulani shepherd cattle across the north of Nigeria and count on crops and grass wherever they go to feed the herd. The crops are the livelihood of the Christians, and this has resulted in decades of conflict. But over the past few years, these attacks have grown more violent and more regular; additionally, the Fulani militants often carry modern weapons, which has made the attacks deadly, and there are reports that they often target Christians and Christian villages.
  - Nigeria has a huge population of Christian widows. When attacking church buildings, pastors and elders were targeted. When attacking homes, the fathers and sons were targeted. Over time, this has left the country with many widows.
  - And yet, the Nigerian church continues to follow Jesus and serve His Church. Churches are running trauma counseling centers, helping distribute relief aid and help with rebuilding efforts in villages that were attacked. The faith of Christians has not died out.
These are only four out of the 50 countries on Open Doors’ World Watch List. Persecution looks different in different places: it can mean being squeezed through harassment, getting fired from a job, discriminated against in every manner possible by society, and sometimes being killed.

YOU SAY AGAIN, PASTOR, THIS IS THE VICTORIOUS CHURCH?

Let’s look at how the world defines “victorious”:

+ having achieved victory
+ conquering
+ triumphant
+ success or triumph over an enemy in battle

But we know that God sees things differently:

+ He tells us that in Isaiah 55:8-9
  - “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”
+ His Word gives us example after example of this Truth.

With that in mind … what does God’s view of “victorious” look like?

I’d like to suggest God’s Word—Jesus’ own lips—give us the attributes in His Church that define VICTORIOUS:

+ In the Book of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3, Jesus speaks to seven churches.
+ He both commends and convicts these congregations.
+ The attributes He commends include:
  1. Good works
  2. Toil
  3. Patient endurance
  4. Can’t bear evil
  5. Call out false apostles
  6. Bearing up for Jesus’ name
  7. Not growing weary
  8. Being faithful until death
  9. Holding fast to Jesus’ name
  10. Not denying faith in Jesus
  11. Growing works
  12. Love
  13. Faith
  14. Service
  15. Keeping Jesus’ word
Now, that's starting to sound like our persecuted family isn't it?

Let's think about these 15 attributes. They seem to fall into four categories:

1. Standing on God's Word
2. Living to please God
3. Counting on God's promises
4. Working for God's Kingdom

How is it possible to live out any of the characteristics of The Victorious Church in the face of persecution? Are these Super Christians, with a big S on their chest, like Superman?

No, they are men and women and children, just like all of us. They do it by the grace of God and the gift of His Holy Spirit! It's that simple. He gives us the grace we need when we need it, and He has sent His Spirit to help minister to us in every situation.

So, if I feel like these people are super Christians, that might be simply because I haven't needed that grace and that gift of the Spirit. After all, why would God give me the grace to persevere through an experience I haven't experienced?

Jesus said if we abide in His Word, we will know the Truth, and the Truth will set us free (John 8:31-32).

To the whole church, He's saying we're free to live for Him: Not for gain in this world but for gain in eternity. Not for laying up treasures on earth, but for laying up treasures in Heaven (Matt 6:19-20).

CONCLUSION

When we think of the Persecuted Church, we might think of:

+ a church in hiding
+ a church in desperation
+ a church on the run
+ a church being squeezed and crushed, to the point of extinction

Let's consider a difference perspective.

The first few verses of Acts chapter 8 tells us about persecution of the church after Stephen had become the first martyr. All the believers—except the apostles—fled.

And in Acts 8:4, we see these beautiful words: “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”

So when you think of the persecuted church, instead imagine a church:
1. Standing on God’s Word
2. Living to please God
3. Counting on God’s promises
4. Working for God’s Kingdom

Let’s see a Victorious Church—just like Jesus described.

Think back to the example of Nehemiah. Nehemiah said: “As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”

And then … he went to work.

How can we follow Nehemiah’s example? What work will we take on? Some options to consider:

+ Praying for our persecuted family to stand strong in their faith
+ Praying with our persecuted family to forgive and bless their enemies
+ Staying up to date on news about suffering believers, keeping our prayers current
+ Telling others about our persecuted family and inviting them to join in the work
+ Writing notes of encouragement to our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world
+ Going to visit our persecuted family
+ Giving to help support our persecuted family

So, now that you’ve heard the reports about your suffering brothers and sisters around the world, take your humble, open, listening hearts to God and let Him direct you. And then—let’s get to work!

Let’s pray.