

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 24

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

Volume 24 • Number 1 • January 2000

By the Power of Your Name

The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

Keywords: Prayer, persecution, suffering, martyr, religious liberty, toleration, conversion;

INTRODUCTION

The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP), held in November each year, is a rallying point for Christians and others to stand behind those who suffer for their faith by providing prayer support and the direction to appropriate kinds of advocacy. It was commenced by Religious Liberty Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF RLC). It is now supported by a coalition of organizations, including Christian Solidarity International, Jubilee Campaign, Open Doors and Release International, regularly attracting observance by more than 100,000 local churches in at least 130 countries. The IDOP Mission Statement is, 'Awakening followers of Christ and concerned others to the plight of persecuted Christians, calling the Church to compassionate prayer and action'.

Christian persecution is hardly new and can be traced to Christianity's beginnings. Jesus Christ himself was martyred on the cross, and the early church faced widespread persecution. While Jesus was on earth, he bore witness to the battle between God's kingdom and the temporal kingdoms of earth.

Modern-day persecution is well-documented, despite some reports to the contrary. In over sixty countries, according to an official US State Department report (1997), Christians face the reality of massacre, rape, torture, mutilation, family division, harassment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment, and even death simply for what they believe. Paul Marshall states in his book, *Their Blood Cries Out*, 'This plague affects over two hundred million people, with an additional four hundred million suffering from discrimination and legal impediments.' In fact, according to leading authorities, there have been more people martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ in the 20th century than in all the previous nineteen combined. Research carried out by the WEF RLC indicates that more people have died in circumstances related to their faith in this century than in all the 20th Century wars combined.

The main reason for the rise in persecution, especially over the past several years, seems to be the exponential growth of Evangelicals in places such as Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. These are the areas where Christians are experiencing discrimination, harassment and persecution at the hands of those with power. However, reported incidences of persecution in the former USSR have actually increased since the fall of Communism. Believers there feel a new sense of support from fellow Christians around the world and so they are now publicly stating their belief in Jesus, willing to risk the repercussions that may follow.

This introductory note and the following sections are taken (with permission) from material prepared by the WEF RLC for the 1999 IDOP and are presented here for the information of readers of *Evangelical Review of Theology* in support of the theme of this issue of the journal. The *Prayer from Egypt* was prepared for 1998 IDOP.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY—THE FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN FREEDOM

by Dr Jun Vencer,
International Director, World Evangelical Fellowship

The most fundamental of human freedoms is freedom of conscience or religious liberty. Christian theology is grounded on the biblical assertion that God created man and woman in his image and made them moral agents. They are intrinsically clothed with dignity and value. They were given the gift of choice as the defining distinctive in creation. The abuse of that freedom resulted in the fall of man and woman, and evil entered our world. Instead of unity and harmony came hatred, racism, division, injustice and wars.

Reconciliation with God in Christ by his Spirit is humanity's only hope. It is in this context that everyone should have the possibility to publicly worship God and to liberate and restore man and creation to their rightful place.

Evangelicals everywhere should promote and preserve religious liberty—for everyone, regardless of colour and language, or belief or unbelief in God. As evangelicals we are committed to promote freedom for all to practise religion, yet forthrightly define the limits of our tolerance, beyond which we have to say no and make our stand even if it should lead to martyrdom.

In the world today, hundreds of thousands of Christians suffer for their faith. In many lands people are denied the right, under threat of penalty or death, to proclaim or hear the gospel, change their religion, or be part of a new community of faith. They are marginalized and powerless, and no one dares take up their cause.

We need to speak for them and stand in solidarity with them. In Christ, all believers are one. To turn a deaf ear to the cries of the persecuted church or look the other way to avoid the ugly sight of their sufferings only makes atheists of us all. Let us bring our people to a greater awareness of the needs of persecuted Christians, pray for them, and reach out, individually or in concert with WEF and others, in practical help to them. In doing so, we serve Christ our Lord.

The WEF International Day of Prayer is a concrete programme to bring about awareness to the cause of the persecuted church worldwide. In our advocacy for religious liberty, we are supported by two pillars: First, the fact that Christ is Lord of the church. Second, that the powers that be have been defeated. Christians everywhere, unite in prayer for the persecuted church. We ask you also to support the projects presented in this material.

OUR MOST EFFECTIVE WEAPON

by John E. Langlois
Chairman, WEF Religious Liberty Commission

When he was in prison, the apostle Paul wrote that 'our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' ([Eph. 6:12](#)). It is all too easy to think that our struggle is with the men and women who are doing the persecuting. They are doing so because they are blinded to the truth. We must pray for our fellow believers who are suffering persecution that the Lord will give them strength to proclaim the gospel

to them and to reflect the love of Christ to them in all situations, even when in great distress. It is impossible in human strength alone.

Paul asked the Ephesian church to do this when he wrote: 'Pray in the spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should' ([Eph. 6:18](#)). His good witness in jail in Philippi resulted in the jailer and all his household turning to Christ and being baptized. We too can pray that not only will the persecutors stop persecuting but that they will accept Christ. Paul was very conscious that this was possible because he too, a fanatic persecutor, was confronted by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and yielded his life to his service. This year, pray that the persecutors may have a 'Damascus road experience'.

Today the worldwide Christian church numbers many millions of people. WEF represents just a part of it, representing 150 million Christians in over 100 countries through their national evangelical alliances. As we come together to pray for each other, we are joined by the wider body of Christ, with the assurance that the effectual fervent prayers of believers are of great value to God. Even demons fear and tremble when they see the weakest believer on his knees. Satan will tremble on this special day when he sees millions of believers praying. He knows better than we do that our most effective weapons are spiritual. And he knows how often we fail to use them.

WHAT I LEARNT IN PRISON ABOUT PRAYER

by Rev. Dr. Hristo Kulichev, Bulgaria

What can a man do confined within the walls of a prison cell? Freedom is taken away from him as well as the opportunity to attend services in church. He has no right to read the Bible. His watch and pen are confiscated along with any tiny bit of paper with which he could relieve the monotony of his stay in the cell. This is the intention of those who have imprisoned him, so that they may exert mental pressure and break down his resistance.

Under such circumstances, the only thing no-one can do is take away the opportunity to pray. I realized that when I needed prayer most, God deprived me of the chance to do anything else. In my loneliness I could be in constant fellowship with God—the only source of power in my life. In prison I realized how cunningly Satan works in our life when we have freedom, keeping us busy with all kinds of things that give us less time to pray.

In prison I came to know that God can satisfy our needs in two different ways—by giving us what we pray for and by delivering us from the need for which we pray. In prison, especially during times of questioning, food is scarce. I was hungry most of the time, and like others thought mostly about food. Then I prayed, 'Lord, you fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Here there is only one of me, so even crumbs will be enough.' God did not give me more bread, but he did free me from the feelings of hunger so that they no longer occupied my mind.

I had the practical experience in prison that the more eager and specific my prayers were, the quicker and more clearly God answered them. During a meeting with the examining magistrate, he asked me whether I would like to see my wife, and together with her decide on who my advocate would be. I was thrilled. I waited impatiently for the meeting—perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow, maybe in the morning or afternoon. The days passed in futile expectation. I realized I was losing my mind, and told myself it was all part of the magistrate's wily plan to destroy my peace of mind. Then I prayed, 'Lord,

deliver me from anything egotistical. I leave everything in your hands. Please take care of my family and of me. Help me remain faithful to you.' He gave me his peace and a bliss that never left me during all my days in prison.

There were fifty to sixty other prisoners in the cell. Every morning and evening I knelt by my bed and prayed. One day the person in charge of the room told me in front of everyone: 'Hristo, the chief said not to pray in the room any more.' 'Let him say it to me', I answered. Several days later the chief called me and asked me:

'Were you informed not to pray in the room?'

'Yes.'

'Then why do you go on praying?'

'Because I am a Christian and a pastor. I am here not because I am a thief or a robber, but because I serve my God in preaching the gospel. Praying is one of the ways to serve God.'

'In this way you are making propaganda.'

'I must pray to my God, and I'm not interested in how other people look at it', I told him.

'Then we should isolate you in a separate cell,' he said.

'Whatever you decide. I am a prisoner and I have no right to choose the place of my confinement, but wherever I am, I shall pray.'

'What do you pray for?' he asked quite unexpectedly.

'For different things—I have been separated from my family for months now. They don't know where I am, nor I where they are. I pray that God may take care of us. You know that the conditions in the prison are hard. I pray that God may give me strength to endure everything with patience and not to grumble.'

'How long is your prayer?' he continued.

'We do not have written prayers. My prayer is over when I have said to God everything I want to.'

'Write down all this in a report and give it to me.'

I wrote the report as asked, and continued to pray without further problems. In prison I realized that we have the mightiest weapon given to us by God—*prayer*.

CONVERSION TO CHRIST IS COSTLY

**By Rev. Richard Howell,
General Secretary, Evangelical Fellowship Of India**

The statement by Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 'I do not accept the contention that people are being converted by force' (TOI) has cleared the air and is a real step forward in restoring the confidence of the minority community. His statement affirms what all who have been converted to Christ instinctively know: How can inducement or force be the ends to follow the One who commanded, 'Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you'? And yet, conversion to Christ is not without cost—it is costly.

Christ demanded of his followers self-denial, love and service to God and humanity, especially to the poor and the downtrodden. He modelled, as he washed the feet of his disciples, that any power that we may have is for the service of others. He cleansed the lepers and rehabilitated them to become participatory members of the society. By asking for a drink of water from a 'dalit' Samaritan woman, he crossed the racial and sexual barriers, establishing new principles for social relationships. It is demonic if Christians, who believe in Jesus, practise the discrimination of the caste system within the church. Jesus denounced hypocritical lifestyles, equating them with whitewashed graves—which may look good on the outside, but inside are filled with dead men's bones. Jesus also taught the rejects of society profound spiritual truths. He told the woman, 'God is Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in Spirit and in Truth.' In his person he revealed the character of God by his words and works. Even in his crucifixion he saved a dying thief and forgave those who crucified him. Didn't Mrs. Gladys Staines do the same when her husband Graham and sons Philip and Timothy were burnt to death? Graham served lepers [in India] as his Master had commanded to love. It was possible because he had been converted to Christ internally and was willing to pay the price. Conversion is a personal, responsible act under the grace of God.

Christianity Was Born in Suffering

The Roman authorities initially regarded Christianity as a branch of Judaism, and extended legal protection. But the violent hostilities of the Jews themselves made the distinction very evident, and the persecution of Christians in Rome under Emperor Nero in 64 AD made the split between Christianity and Judaism permanent. Emperor Nero's insatiable desire to 'modernise' Rome led him to burning Rome, and the Emperor who was worshipped in Rome blamed the Christians for the fire and burnt Christians at the stakes as torch lights. Nero revelled in his lust for power while Christians sang on the burning stakes. By AD 90 the mere fact of being a Christian had become a cause for punishment. By the time Pliny was the governor of Bithynia (111–113), Christianity was already viewed as criminal but the persecution was not so severe at this stage. Marcus Aurelius (161–180) strengthened laws against strange religions (176) and initiated a sharper period of persecution which extended into the beginning of the reign of Commodus (180–192). Always illegal, and with extreme penalties hanging over it, the Christian profession involved constant peril for its adherents, yet the number of actual martyrs in this period appears to have been relatively small compared with those of the third and fourth centuries.

Why Were They Persecuted?

Christians were charged with atheism and treason: atheism, because they gave up worshipping their former gods. Refusal to participate in the mandatory emperor worship constituted their treason. Today Christians are not charged with atheism, but we can worship only one God revealed in Jesus Christ. Christian understanding of God is determined by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For an experience to be called Christian it must have the face of Jesus on it. And the experience of Christ can be communicated rationally.

As for the charge of treason, the contribution of Indian Christians to nation building in the area of education and medical health speaks in volumes, especially considering the minuscule minority Christians are in India.

During the time of Justin Martyr (110–165), the rulers of the land actively abetted the persecution of Christianity. Inciting mobs to attack Christians was an integral part of this strategy. To all the accusations the best answer of the Christians was their consistency in

loyalty to Christ, and their superior morality as judged by the standards of society about them. Love and service of God and humanity is the best defence against accusations.

The Attraction of Christ

Justin Martyr, who wrote much in answer to the charges of atheism, treason, cannibalism and promiscuity against Christians, was born in Flavia Neapolis, a city of Samaria, around AD 114. After trying various systems his elevated tastes and refined perception made him a disciple of Socrates and Plato, searching after some kind of knowledge which would satisfy the cravings of his soul. At last he became acquainted with Jesus Christ, being at once impressed with the extraordinary fearlessness which the Christians displayed in the presence of death, and with the grandeur, stability and truth of the teachings of the Bible. What Plato was feeling after, Justin Martyr found in Jesus Christ.

The angels had sung at the birth of Christ: 'Good will to men'. This song had been heard from successive generations, breaking forth from the lips of sufferers on the crosses, among lions, and amid blazing faggots. Here was a nobler stoicism that needed interpretation. Not only those boasting of a loftier intellectual sphere, the professors; but thousands of men, women, and children, withdrawing themselves not at all from the ordinary and humble lot of people, were inspired by it, to live and die heroically sublimely—exhibiting a superiority to revenge and hate entirely unaccountable, praying for their enemies, and seeking to glorify their God by love to their fellow men. Justin settled in Rome as a Christian teacher. While he was there, the philosophers, especially the Cynics, plotted against him, and he sealed his testimony to the truth by martyrdom.

HOW CAN WE SUPPORT EACH OTHER IN THE BODY OF CHRIST?

A Bible Study by Dr. Abdul Menes Noor, Cairo

When we begin reading chapter 12 of the book of Acts, we exclaim, 'What a sad beginning!' But when we continue reading, our hearts become full of glorious joy. The beginning says that king Herod arrested some church leaders, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. After arresting him he put him in prison intending to bring him up for public trial. But the chapter ends with Peter released miraculously and Herod dead. This is a demonstration of the wise saying, 'Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning' ([Ps. 30:5](#)). What happened to turn sadness into joy?

Prayer

'The church was earnestly praying to God for Peter' ([Acts 12:5](#)). Sometimes we think that prayer is what the weaklings do because they can do nothing else. But prayer is a tremendous power. It works. That is where we all should begin. Had it not been for prayers lifted to the Throne for me, I would not have lived till today. I appreciate hearing from people all over the world that they are praying for me and my church. This is why we are like the burning bush. 'Though the bush was on fire it did not burn up' ([Exodus 3:2](#)). When Satan sifts us as wheat we need to hear that prayers are lifted up for us, 'That your faith may not fail'. And we 'can strengthen our brothers' ([Lk. 22:31-32](#)).

What kind of prayers were offered up by the early church fathers? There is a model prayer in [Acts 4](#) which the church lifted up after the release of Peter and John from the Jerusalem jail.

What a victorious beginning we find in this prayer! They lifted up their hearts to the One whom they knew to be the Sovereign Lord and the Creator of the universe (v. [24](#)) They praised and glorified him. Then they built their prayer on Divine promises and quoted from the second Psalm. They held an analogy between the past and the present. Those who stood against the Lord in the past were defeated. Those who are standing against Jesus now will meet the same end. God's victory, then, is their portion because they belong to him. They were sure that what was happening to them was in God's hands. The church's opponents were doing what God's power and will had decided beforehand for them to do. And of course, he wills the best for his children (vv. [25-28](#)).

The petitions they lifted are a wonderful example of what the oppressed should ask. For their persecutors they asked the Lord to consider their hearts. For themselves they asked for boldness to witness. For all the people they asked for miracles of healing in the name of Christ.

What a prayer! They were bold. Pastor Wurmbrand of Romania, when preaching from my Cairo pulpit, taught me that when we are scared the world scares us more. But when we are not scared the world becomes scared of us. How great was God's commandment to Jeremiah, 'Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city' ([Jer. 1:17, 18](#)). He still gives us the same order and the same promise.

As a result of the [Acts 4](#) prayer, the place was shaken. The praying group was filled with the Holy Spirit. They spoke the word of God boldly.

I once asked myself, why do I often preach from [Acts 12:11](#) 'The Lord sent His angel and rescued me' but I never preach on [Acts 12:2](#) 'James ... put to death with the sword'? Didn't the church pray for James? Why does Heaven's answer seem so negative? Jesus had prepared the room of James in the Father's house, while Peter's room was not yet ready ([John 14:2](#)). The Father had seen that James' ministry was completed, while Peter's was still incomplete.

Were the early believers disappointed because God did not answer their prayers for James positively? I do not think so. Their [Acts 4](#) prayer shows that their main petition was for boldness and miracle performing to witness to Jesus' power. This petition was always given! We pray for all the persecuted Christians. When some of them are tortured, or slain by the sword, or shot by bullets, we know that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. We also know that the time of their crowning has come when they die.

Divine Interference

The story of [Acts 12](#) tells us that James was released to heaven. As for Peter, it says that the angel of the Lord appeared and a light was shining in the cell. The angel broke Peter's chains. He lovingly reminded him to put on his clothes and sandals. Then he asked him to wrap his cloak around him and follow. The angel opened the prison gates and led Peter to safety. What a wonderful care for small details. What a loving kindness that was! Jesus says that even the hairs of our heads are all numbered ([Matt. 10:30](#)). Each hair has a number, and the total is also recorded!

We ask our sisters and brothers to pray for us and to trust that our sovereign God always interferes. Some of us will meet the end of James and others that of Peter, but the room in the Father's house is well furnished, or on its way to be furnished!

Thank you for your prayers. Praise God for your care for the persecuted Christians. Praise him for your confident faith.

A Prayer from Egypt

Father God,

We are honoured to belong to You. We are Your little flock and it is Your good pleasure to give us the kingdom. Therefore help us to rejoice, not to lament.

You know that we are a minority, because You said that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. So help us season the world and make our light shine brighter.

You know that we are under pressure, so protect us from putting our light under a basket or a bed, but on a lampstand.

You know that some of us are scared, so help us be encouraged to encourage them. Affirm to us again that You are on the throne and that Yours is the kingdom, power and glory for ever.

Help us love our persecutors and forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.

In the precious name of Jesus, Amen.