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LESSON 4 *STORIES OF PERSECUTION*

Gail Sawrie

AIM

To understand that persecution is still happening in the world and how the Church of the Nazarene is responding to this challenge. To be saddened by the pain of our Christian brothers and sisters who belong to our church family. To become involved in standing up for the rights of others around the world and to encourage and support them through constant prayer.

LESSON INFORMATION

Introduction

Over 160,000 believers were martyred in 1996. There were close to 100 million martyrs in the 20th century (*World Mission Digest*). More people were martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ in the 20th century than in all the previous 19 centuries combined (James and Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood*, and U.S. House Resolution. *Scripps-Howard News Service*, September 28, 1996). More people died in circumstances related to their faith in the 20th century than in all the 20th-century wars combined (statistical research of the WEF Religious Liberty Commission).

Persecution of Christians is painful to read and hear about, difficult to consider, and very painful if you are seriously interceding in prayer. Yet, in spite of the pain, there are victories.

The following stories may make you cringe, cry, or at least be uncomfortable, especially if you remind yourself that they are true and that similar experiences—and sometimes worse—happen all over the world. These are stories of our Nazarene family. You should definitely thank the Lord for the brothers and sisters you have yet to meet who are persevering in their faith.

Persecution Is Real, and It Happens to Nazarenes

I replaced the telephone receiver and sat in stunned silence. I had just talked with a pastor who, when he had presented the need for prayer for the persecuted in his church, was challenged by someone in his congregation who doubted the “seriousness” of the problem. As the weeks rolled by, I received similar calls.

There are a number of reasons why people may not understand the concept of persecution. Here are a few:

- **For many years, persecution was not discussed.** This was true in many denominations. No one *likes* to hear of negative situations; however, in recent years, the Body of Christ has seen the need to be open about the sufferings of believers (keeping their safety in mind) so we can support them with our prayers and action.
- **Often we think that people live and worship just as we do.** We really do not know much about the difficult laws and religions that affect our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- **Persecution comes from a variety of sources.** Just when you think you know what those sources are—religion, government, and terrorists—along comes a new one!

We would like you to meet some of your brothers and sisters in these difficult circumstances. Consider this a family picture album in which you must create the pictures in your mind from the stories as they are told.

These stories were sent from all over the world. We have left out names and countries as a safety precaution. Some of the people are no longer persecuted. For that, you can praise the Lord. However, all of these are representative of many others whose stories we have yet to hear. You don't need names to pray for the persecuted church. You just need a willing heart.

Country No. 1

Nikolai, a young man of 24 with a “dark heritage and a scandalous past, was anti-patriotic, rebellious,” and intelligent. He came from a line of “criminals” who had been beaten, imprisoned, tortured, and still they persevered. Seemingly, nothing could stop them.

The rumor was that Nikolai’s family held “secret meetings with other unsavory characters.” Their plans were “subversive,” and their philosophy “birthed all manner of social evil.” Nikolai’s father would not be stopped, his uncles would not be silenced, and the movement they led gained momentum daily.

Leaders in Nikolai’s area discussed together and decided it was time to stop this.

Imagine having the strength and perseverance to be a tremendous student and only to barely make it into university because of one phrase stamped on your internal passport: “politically misguided.” This was Nikolai’s life. On several occasions, the young man was called to the dean’s office at the university, only to be met by police. They began with persuasive, friendly “chats” that ultimately led to threats.

Yes, Nikolai was a Christian who was raised in an area where Christianity was illegal. This 24-year-old student had the courage to look his accusers in the eye and simply reply to their threats, “You have threatened, beaten, and imprisoned the Christians in my family. Some of you have even killed. You won’t change their minds, and I won’t help you. Do what you will.”

After holding fast to his beliefs, this “politically misguided” man saw the atmosphere begin to change in his country. There was a rally, and many young people there found the Lord. After studying to be a mechanical and civil engineer, Nikolai became a bivocational pastor of a growing Nazarene church. From the mother church that Nikolai pastors, there are strong church plants in many nearby villages.

Nikolai is not alone. Three pastors and six laypeople gather in a living room. Each carries a burden for his or her community and a passion for Christ. They are the district advisory board for the Church of the Nazarene in this country.

The commitment of these individuals costs them greatly—forbidden university degrees, persecuted families, and interrogations. These people have young families and careers, and serving the church comes at a price. Several have given up profitable opportunities in western Europe to stay here and minister.

Nikolai’s generation actually joined the movement of truth that swept through the country through the dedication of his father and uncles. In spite of the cost—or perhaps because of it—these Nazarenes have a vision and a strategy for shaping the future of their country and lifting up the Lord.

Country No. 2

A well-known doctor, one of only three medical specialists in his country, had been trained in the best educational institutions available for his specialty. Then the unthinkable happened—the doctor learned of the saving power of Jesus Christ.

After accepting Christ as his Savior, the doctor’s country stripped him of his medical practice, and he had to work at the most menial jobs. It was then that God spoke to the doctor/laborer and asked him to be a Nazarene pastor. The doctor/laborer/pastor was recently ordained and serves God with passion.

Country No. 3

One Tuesday, a heavily armed man in a military uniform marched into a prayer service at a Nazarene church, slammed the door, and demanded to know who the leader was.

The pastor nervously extended his hand and invited the man to sit, so the group of 20 people could listen to him. As the pastor touched the “visitor’s” hand, a change washed over the military man’s face. The man declared, “Pastor, you are a man of God. When I touched your hand, I was almost forced to the floor by supernatural force. I came to kill you; but please, Pastor, I beg you—pray for me. It will be a great privilege one day to be a member of your church.” The man wrote his name on a piece of paper, gave it to the pastor, and left.

The pastor looked outside the church and saw a truck full of armed men. No doubt they were guerrilla fighters and had originally come to assassinate the pastor. Their plans were changed.

That day, the church had one of the best prayer services ever. The pastor and those in attendance thanked God for saving them from a terrible ordeal. They were convinced that the word of the Lord is true: “the LORD surrounds and protects his people” (Ps. 125:2b, NLT).

Statistics show that, in that area from 2003 to 2006, more than 300 evangelical churches were closed, and in 2003, 44 pastors were assassinated.

* * *

In March 2005 a pastor in another city in that area found an envelope beside the door. Tearing it open, he began to read the enclosed letter. To his surprise, he noticed it was from a rebel group that had terrorized thousands of civilians.

The letter read,

People of the evangelical church, we greet you cordially. We inform you that we have received too many complaints about you. We don't want to use violent force. We are a big family, and you hear about us all over the world. This is to demand that you evacuate your church.

If you don't respond to this note, we will be not responsible for the consequences.

Rebel Group

The pastor and his family immediately reacted in fear. However, the letter was a reason to seek God's presence through prayer. The church had established a daily 5 A.M. prayer service and a time of fasting on Saturdays.

More than a year has passed since the pastor was threatened. The church did not move, and the pastor believes the church was placed there by God to be a beacon in the midst of darkness. God recognized the people's faith and faithfulness. They are in the midst of revival, and the church has grown and become stronger.

Country No. 4

The piercing ring of a phone startled us above the noise. We were traveling on the rough and uneven road to the central part of the country. Women with water jars on their heads, ox carts piled too high, and buses filled to capacity were all on the road.

We watched the leader's face turn pale as he listened. He then told the shocking news—25 Nazarene district assembly delegates, including a pastor and his teenage son, had been captured by radical religious terrorists. They were beaten, stripped, and all but one of their mobile phones seized. That phone was taken after the leader made a distress call.

When we arrived at our destination, we learned little more about the safety or condition of the pastor, his son, and two other leaders—a woman and a man—who had been thrown into jail. They were accused of forcing people of other religions to convert to Christ and to commit to Christianity. A conspiracy had snared these Nazarene leaders, and we knew nothing more about these people or the other 21 villagers accompanying them.

We prayed without stopping, urgently asking God to deliver our team from evil intent, to preserve their lives, and to strengthen their faith. We called the pastor's wife and sensed she understood our hearts, even as she struggled to comprehend our language. She wept, and we grieved with her and her daughter.

We changed the time for the assembly as a safety precaution, suspecting the radicals had access to earlier information. We set records for the shortest assembly sermon preached and the quickest reports received. We concluded in less than two hours and evacuated the premises prior to any interruption and before the time the assembly was originally to have been called to order.

During difficult hours that stretched into days, we watched the situation and made plans. Finally, the four leaders were released, and we learned of their persecution. Several days later they told us that the other 21 delegates—without money, food, or shelter—had somehow returned to their homes hundreds of kilometers away.

When we asked the pastor how his teenager had endured the intense persecution, the pastor responded quietly, “My son now knows that God called him to preach while we were being abused in that prison. He wants to lay down his life for Christ and the Cross. He wants to share the love of Jesus with people in darkness and disbelief, such as those who captured and mistreated us. His faith has advanced more than I could have imagined.”

Country No. 5

Brother Alpha (not his name) was among the longest surviving believers among his people, and he only became a Christian in 1986! When his country was being destroyed by civil instability, lists of known Christians were printed on flyers and the people on those lists were hunted down one by one. Of those known Christians, only three survived; two fled into exile in other countries and only Brother Alpha remained in his homeland. He survived by going into deep hiding.

A few years later, circumstances changed, and Brother Alpha began cautious evangelism in his community, becoming the leader of a group of house fellowships. He was known as a wise and prudent man, who led the church effectively while putting neither himself, nor others, at unnecessary risk. His home was a haven for believers, and his visitors received warm hospitality from the family’s simple resources.

In 2005 Brother Alpha became a teacher in an extension training program for pastors. This provided an opportunity to fellowship with Christians from other ethnic backgrounds for the first time. Those in class with Brother Alpha were deeply moved by his testimony and faith.

Brother Alpha became ill and went to be with the Lord in 2005. He was so highly respected that his neighborhood, almost exclusively a religion other than Christian, collected money for his care during his illness. Upon his death, a memorial service was held by his fellow students in which money was raised to benefit his family. Brother Alpha’s community of believers also took an offering. A fund was established, allowing his widow to launch a small business; and his two children were enrolled in the child sponsorship program.

The church in Brother Alpha’s community celebrates his faithful witness and recognizes the important contribution he made to ministry among his people. At the time of his death, there were approximately 100 believers in Brother Alpha’s area and 30 people were a part of his house fellowship. “[He] has fought the good fight, [he] has finished the course, [he] has kept the faith.”

Country No. 6

A Church of the Nazarene grew from a Bible study established in 2001. It was only the fourth community to have a Nazarene congregation among 8 million people in a difficult country.

Those early years were ones of great persecution, because our holiness teachings were viewed as heretical by other evangelicals. In 2002, the congregation built a grass-roofed church, which the community set on fire. Leaders were jailed for their teaching and were labeled as anti-Christian. Nazarenes were not allowed to be buried in community cemeteries, their cattle were excluded from the community herd, and they were denied fire when their fires burned out.

Many missionary leaders worked with the emerging district. In February 2004 a person from that country was selected as district superintendent.

That year marked the darkest days of persecution for those believers; other evangelicals mocked the Nazarenes saying, “There will now be no Nazarenes left. Their missionaries are gone.” In November and December 2004, education by extension was introduced to the pastors, and the district superintendent began training them in church-planting principles. The result was an extraordinary working of the Holy Spirit in a short 18 months!

The church that began in 2001 became the mother church for the community. It recently completed a new building from local funds on ground donated by the community. Today, that area consists of 105 congregations with 20 organized churches.

So what does a spontaneous holiness church planting movement look like? Souls are being saved on a daily basis, lives are being transformed. Former alcoholics and drugs addicts are recovering from destructive habits; some are becoming pastors. The place of worship of another religion sits empty. Wives are no longer beaten, and families’ finances are not squandered. Many children are now going to school for the first time because there is money to pay school fees.

We praise the Lord for His work in this district!

What Can We Do?

- Think about those who are persecuted, listen to their stories, and empathize with them. Pray for them.
- Tell others about these individuals—their faithfulness to God and to the Church and about the injustices they experience.
- Support them by writing government officials, working with other churches in your area, and contacting organizations involved in persecution research.

PRESENTATION IDEA:

“PRAYER FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH”

Prepare and Present

Prepare a prayer evening for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (the second Sunday of November every year). This global interdenominational prayer event allows time for churches to pray for the persecuted. Provide prayer requests for the persecuted.

Option No. 2: “Family Photo Album”

Have two people (any ages) look through an old photo album. As they turn the pages, have people step up and tell the stories of the six countries. Even if your church is small, this can be done with a minimum of seven people (or fewer, if people tell more than one story). Encourage all to participate.

Option No. 3: “How Strong Is Your Belief?”

Divide your large group into groups of no more than eight people. Ask one person to take notes for each group, and explain they will have to think and talk fast so everyone has a chance to share.

Have someone read Acts 12:1-19, then discuss how different people in your group would have reacted had they been: (1) Peter, (2) Rhoda, or (3) in the prayer meeting. Allow about seven minutes for this section.

Distribute two of the “country” stories to each group and have them discuss how they would have reacted if they were a person in that story. Allow about seven minutes for this section.

Combine the groups once again and compare the discussions.

CALL TO ACTION

- Meditate on the following scriptures about persecution:
 - Hebrews 13:3
 - John 15:20
 - 1 Corinthians 12:26
 - Acts 11:19-26
 - Matthew 25:31-46
 - Acts 12:1-19
- Set aside time in your worship service to emphasize the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, the second Sunday in November.
- Organize a prayer service for persecuted Christians.
- Make resources available to your group for them to read stories about persecuted Christians around the world today.
- Pray for God’s protection upon Nazarene leaders serving in dangerous world areas.