

Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

The crimes being committed against Christians and other minority groups by the terrorist group ISIS cripple the imagination. How can a group of people be so depraved and bloodthirsty, and frankly, demonic? Can anything be done to stop them? Is there any way at all to help these Christians who have watched their children die before their eyes, who have been repeatedly raped and tortured, who have been given the choice to convert to Islam or die? What would we do if we were in their shoes?

There are several things that we need to keep firmly in mind as we hear about and respond to global persecution. The following items may help in understanding what is happening and help us to better know what we can do to help.

Persecution isn't new.

Jesus put it pretty bluntly to his disciples: “You will be hated by everyone because of me” (Mark 10:22). He also said: “If the world hates you, know that it hated me first” (John 15:18). Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven has always meant conflict with the kingdom of this world. Starting with the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7, this conflict has often turned violent and deadly. Following Jesus has always meant the potential of persecution. (It is interesting that December 26 is the feast day of Stephen in the Catholic Church. The day following Christmas is marked by a remembrance of the first martyr.) As American Christians who mostly do not live under the threat of physical persecution, I think it's safe to say that we are in the minority of Christians throughout the ages. The persecution that we are seeing in the world today isn't new, but it is growing more intense. Persecution of Christians has accelerated over the last 100 years and has reached levels on a global scale never seen before. Today, in places as diverse as Columbia, India, Egypt, the Philippines, and Sudan people are suffering the loss of property, physical harm, and sometimes death because of their commitment to the Lord Jesus.

Your family is under attack.

Whenever ANY person made in God's image suffers unjustly at the hands of evil men, we should be outraged. It is important to recognize that persecution of Christians is an attack on our family. Paul said “we are all sons and daughters of God through faith” (Galatians 3:26). When we followed Christ, we joined a global

family. In other places in scripture we are compared to a body with many parts and a building made of many stones. The point? Theologically you may have a closer kinship with Christians suffering in Iraq than you have with your next-door neighbor. Persecution is not just some distant problem. Those suffering for their faith are your brothers and your sisters, your sons and your daughters. We are part of the same family with the same Lord, which leads me to the next point.

God has called us to stand with the persecuted church.

The author of Hebrews wrote words of encouragement to a group of Christians who were struggling in their faith. He reminds them of their past, “Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated” (Heb. 10:33). Even when they were not being persecuted, they stood “side by side” – literally they had become partners – with those who were being persecuted. Later, Hebrews says, “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (Heb. 13:3). So how can we stand side by side with persecuted Christians? We can partner with ministries serving the persecuted Church around the globe. We can continue to shine light on their suffering. Once the media loses interest and the latest Kardashian story distracts the public, we have an obligation to keep telling the story of the persecuted church. We must also reject in ourselves the type of selfish, apathetic, and sometimes whiny faith that mocks the sacrifice that our brothers and sisters are making. Finally, we must pray.

Persecution is an urgent reminder to pray.

Prayer and persecution consistently go hand in hand in scripture. Our first reaction however is probably outrage. Anger is an understandable reaction. If hearing stories about butchered children doesn't make you want to hurt someone, you should check your pulse. Anger is even a biblical reaction. Have you read through the Psalms lately? So many of the Psalms (we call them “imprecatory”) bring anger and even hatred to God because of attacks against God's people. But within these Psalms we observe a deeper biblical principle. Those feelings and the desire for vengeance are brought to God in prayer. When the first Christians encountered persecution in Acts 4, they responded by gathering together in prayer. They prayed boldly, and the room where they were praying was shaken! We find prayer and persecution linked in Revelation. In 6:10, the saints who have died because of their testimony cry out “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Maybe you've prayed something like that recently. Persecution is an urgent call to the Church to pray for God to

take action, to pray for miracles, to pray for His kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, to pray for the continued endurance and boldness of his saints so that Jesus' name would be known and glorified. But we can't stop there. One of Jesus' most radical teachings – a teaching that he lived out perfectly in his own death – is found in Matthew 5:44, “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” The gospel of grace calls us to pray not just for the persecuted church, but also for our enemies. This is so hard. We will find ourselves praying this prayer through gritted teeth! This is definitely not the way of the world. But then again, the gospel has never been about following the way of the world.

The resurrection changes everything.

This summer at MOVE thousands of students all across the country celebrated the simple truth that the resurrection has changed everything – the way we talk, the way we care about the poor, the way that we think about wisdom, the way we pursue wealth – everything. The resurrection also changes the way we think about persecution and how we pray in the midst of persecution. We are angered. We are frustrated. We are hurting. We are confused. But we do not despair. And we do not give up hope even in death. No program of torture or persecution can ever remove the victory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Paul reminds us in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Please join us on August 18 as we fast and pray for the persecuted and for those who persecute them.