



"Stand with the Persecuted"
Rev. 2:8-11
4-17-16



This morning I want you to turn in your Bibles to Revelation 2:8-11 as we talk about Standing with the Persecuted. Stand. Read. Pray.

You know as we read this letter to the church at Smyrna, and of persecution in the pages of the NT, and elsewhere in church history, some American Christians might think, "Aren't you glad those days are over?" But friend they're not. Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world. In fact, Christianity Today once claimed that more believers died for their faith in Christ during the 20th century alone than in all 19 previous centuries since the founding of the church. And in the 21st century we seeing even more. Persecution against Christians is taking place in alarming proportions in many countries around the world today. Open Doors USA reports that at least 100 million Christians are being persecuted for their faith worldwide and that each month: 322 Christians are killed for their faith, 214 Churches and Christian properties are destroyed, 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians, such as beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests, forced marriages, etc. In fact, Open Doors claims that 2015 was the "[worst year in modern history](#)" for Christian persecution."¹

We have witnessed the violent advance of ISIS, especially in Iraq and Syria, displacing and persecuting Christians who would not convert to Islam, marking their homes with the Arabic letter "N" for Nazarene. Iraq's Christian community, one of the oldest in the world, has nearly disappeared. In the last several years, [more than 140,000 Christians](#) have fled for their lives.² Those who stayed behind have been tortured. Raped. Murdered. And in Syria, [700,000 Christians have fled](#) from their homes.³ Persecutors have tortured and even crucified those who resist.



A year ago, we saw horrific images videos from ISIS terrorists that showed them shooting and beheading some [21](#) and then [30](#) Ethiopian Christians on a beach in Libya.⁴ These images, now seared into our collective memory, are a heart-wrenching reminder of the costs paid by our brothers and sisters for following Jesus.

In Sudan where they are trying to impose the Muslim religion on all citizens, some 2 million have died, most because of their Christian faith. Christian children have been sold into slavery and many into prostitution (2 reporters bought 6 girls for price of 2 cows). In Saudi Arabia where they have zero protection for Christians, citizens are paid a bounty of \$3,000 for exposing Home Bible Studies.

In Pakistan, speaking against Mohammed and for Christ is punishable by death. In fact, a [Christian husband and his pregnant wife were burned alive by a mob of 1,200 people, after a local mosque stoked allegations of blasphemy against them](#). Most recently, this past Easter

weekend, a [group of Christians gathered at an amusement park in Lahore, Pakistan, were victims of a bombing](#). The blast tore through the park, claiming the lives of 69 people, mostly women and children, and injuring nearly 350 others. The explosives were detonated by a suicide bomber next to a park where people had worshipped the risen Christ. “The target,” said members of the Pakistani Taliban, “was Christians.”⁵

But persecution is not only intense in Muslim nations. In North Korea, you can be [executed for owning a Bible](#)⁶ and [between 50,000-70,000 Christians are currently brutalized in prison camps](#) by the repressive, Communist dictatorship.⁷ In Nigeria, [thousands of Christians were killed and hundreds of churches attacked](#) in 2015.⁸ In India, Hindu nationalists have repeatedly attacked Christians, and [one said](#) his group’s aim was “to ensure that Islam and Christianity “cease to exist” in India.⁹ In China, their policy and goal is to wipe out every underground house church in existence. Christians who are caught participating in their faith are beaten, tortured with cattle prods and electric drills, many are sent off to labor camps or killed.

I can talk in the abstract about statistics and unspeakable acts of persecution. But I want us to feel the weight of this personally, because these horrible things are not happening to strangers. They are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are a part of our spiritual family.

For example, there is Damaris who was widowed in 2010 when her husband was beaten to death by Islamic group Boko Haram in Nigeria, leaving her to support her four children alone. She said: “It is not easy, but the Lord is faithful.” Asked if she could forgive those who killed her husband because he was a Christian, and she said: “I will forgive. Because if I will not forgive, the Lord Jesus will not forgive me... It is not easy... But God will give me the grace to love.” She added: “I want to live a life that will glorify God, and be a model for my children.... Pray for me that I will be strong and courageous.”¹⁰ Damaris is part of our family of faith.



Consider Khalia, an Iraqi Christian in her fifties, who was captured and held hostage along with 47 others. During her 15 days in captivity, she rejected demands to convert, despite a gun being put to her head and a sword to her neck. She literally fought off ISIS militants as they tried to rape the girls, and again later when they tried to take a 9-year-old as a bride. Because of the abuse, 14 men gave in to ISIS’ demands and said they would convert to Islam. Khalia would not. Ultimately, the hostages were left in the desert to walk to Erbil. Others in Kurdistan affirmed without prompting about Khalia that “she had saved many people.”¹¹ That is your courageous sister in Christ!

The Christians in Smyrna also showed their love for Christ in that they were willing to suffer for Him. But today, we don’t want hardship, we don't want harassment, we don't want the pressure of persecution. In fact, we try to avoid it at all costs, and yet there is a special blessing promised to those who persevere through persecution. Jesus said: "Blessed are you when men 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!" And the same risen Lord sends a letter to this troubled but triumphant church at Smyrna to encourage them as they persevered through persecution.

Now that kind of persecution may seem like a distant rumble of thunder to Christians in America, but the storm is fast approaching here as well. Take a look at the legal cases that have come down over the past generation or so, and you will see an alarming trend. School prayer, Bible reading, the Ten Commandments, nativity scenes, a moment of silence, prayers at graduations and at games all have been ruled unconstitutional. Now churches and ministries are being told that they must violate their deeply held beliefs about human life and pay for abortions and abortion causing drugs as a part of the Obamacare Mandate, under penalty of crippling fines. Now business people, government officials, members of the military, etc. are being threatened, punished, fined, fired, and even jailed for their biblical beliefs about marriage. And what's true in the courts and government entities is increasingly true in society. Every day, people are laughed at, discriminated against, condemned as intolerant. Every day people lose promotions, positions, and jobs. Folks, I'm convinced that if we do not experience a sweeping revival in America, that perhaps our children and definitely our grandchildren will experience real and radical persecution, maybe even like what we're seeing in some of these oppressive countries. So we should use our freedom to defend our freedom before we lose our freedom, Amen?!

But we shouldn't be surprised. Because if you demonstrate a passion for Christ, one of the immediate results will be persecution. And that's true in any age, in any setting--Jesus said: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you... (John 15:18-20 ESV). Not might, not may, but will. Paul said: "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted..." (2 Tim. 3:12 ESV)." If you have a passion for Christ, a zeal for Christ, a love for Christ, you will suffer persecution. So the letter to the church at Smyrna in Rev. 2:9-11 is very relevant to us today. And we'll begin by looking at the background.

I. BACKGROUND

As much as any of the seven letters, the background of the city weaves in and out of the background of the church. The city of Smyrna was named after its chief product, a spice we know as myrrh. And this aromatic extract from a thorny tree was used primarily in the embalming of the dead. And the word Smyrna actually occurs 3 times in the NT with reference to Christ—at His birth (Matt. 2:11), crucifixion (Mark 15:23), and His burial (John 19:39). Smyrna is just another way of saying the word "Myrrh." And this city got its name from the spice that they exported around the known world, and consequently made them very wealthy.

And they were a proud community. In fact, on their coins they proclaimed themselves as the First City of Asia. The city itself was over 1,000 years old, having been destroyed by the Persians, rebuilt and brought back to life by Alexander the Great's followers, and during this time it was an important city in the Empire of Rome. It was one of the first planned cities in the Greco-Roman world. The historian Aristades likened it to a beautiful statue. They had a highway system, and a well-built harbor, and thus a flourishing trade. Smyrna was one of the richest, most beautiful cities in Asia Minor. In fact, this city is still around today, it is called Izmir, and it is the second largest city in Turkey (pop. of 2.85 million in 2014).

But not only was it an aesthetically beautiful city, its inhabitants were fiercely loyal to Rome. In 195 BC, Smyrna was the first city in history to dedicate a temple to the worship of the goddess of Rome. When the Roman bogged down in their war with Mithradates of Persia in 95 BC, the soldiers were ill clothed to continue in the winter. So the city of Smyrna stripped themselves of their clothes and sent them by special envoy in order to demonstrate their loyalty. Indeed, Cicero, the famous Roman orator, commented that of all the cities of the East, Smyrna was the most loyal to Rome. The people of Smyrna were so proud of being Romans that they wanted to show their gratitude for the benefits of the Empire by worshipping the one who embodied the Empire, the Emperor Himself. In AD 26, around the time Jesus began His ministry, Smyrna won a competition among the cities of Asia for the site of a Temple for the worship of Emperor Tiberius. So they were trend-setters, they led their part of the world in the worship of all things Roman, and they took great pride in their loyalty to Caesar.

But the church at Smyrna took great pride in their loyalty to Christ, they refused to worship Caesar at the Temple, and this resulted in conflict, confrontation, and persecution. Indeed, the church was accused of treason. For the Emperor Domitian had declared that everyone in the Empire must burn incense and worship him as supreme deity. In fact, he was such a humble guy that he only received mail addressed: "Lord and God Domitian." So worshipping Jesus would have been as treasonous as burning the US flag or selling military secrets to Iran, North Korea, or the Chinese. And yet the church's love for and loyalty to Jesus was such that they encountered and endured severe persecution, so much so that many were put to death. So we need to learn this truth, and it is this: When we are zealous for Christ, and faithful to Christ, and God opens the windows of heaven to bless us, the devil will open the gates of hell to blast us. And that's what happened to the believers in Smyrna.

II. IDENTIFICATION:

Well now that we know the background of the letter and the circumstances under which it was written, let's give this letter from heaven to a persecuted church a closer look. Like all the letters, it is addressed to the angel of the church, the pastor of the church at Smyrna--and I'll talk about him later. And the risen Lord identifies Himself here in v 8. He had shared these words earlier in 1:17-18. And these words of comfort are repeated here in v 8. The Risen Christ was saying: "I am the first and the last, the Alpha and the Omega. Before the ancient city of Smyrna was, I am. After the city of Smyrna crumbles into the dust of time, I will be. Before there was a Rome, I ruled. When Rome is gone, I will be Lord. I was reigning before your suffering and I will reign after your suffering is complete, and I will be with you every moment in between. I was, I am, I will always be with you." What a comfort. He's the First and the Last.

And then He says, literally: "I died and I came back to life." Compare this with the background of the city. It had been destroyed by the Persians and resurrected by Alexander's generals. It had died, and came back to life. But it was also true in a more potent and powerful way of Jesus when He said: "I was dead but am alive!"

Illustration: Do you remember the movie "El Cid?" (Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren). In their legends and history, he was a great Christian hero of medieval Spain. When the pagan

Muslim Moors were pouring into Spain it was El Cid who met them and turned them away. But his story has a strange twist. He was mortally wounded in a preliminary skirmish before the final battle, so his men carried him to a castle where he made them swear that he would lead his army into battle, dead or alive. So when he died, they put his corpse inside of his armor, welded it to the saddle of his stallion, and with his visor open, El Cid rode out in front of his troops in a sensational moment. His men were amazed, their flagging spirits were lifted, they rallied behind him, readied themselves for battle, and routed the Moors. And all of the time they were being led by a corpse.

The Lord Jesus stands before this suffering church, and before our church, and says: "I was once a corpse, but by the power of God, I was raised back to life." Friend, its no delusion, it is no deception, it is no charade. The Lord Jesus is not dead, His tomb is open and empty! He is alive forevermore! And if a corpse could rally medieval Christians, the Living Lord ought to inspire the modern Church: "I am the one who lives, I have the keys to every darkness and every difficulty that my church will ever face, and I will lead them to ultimate victory, storming the very gates of hell itself!"

III. COMMENDATION:

Well we turn from this word of identification to the commendation. Notice, it is all positive (v 9). Three things here. The risen Lord says: "I know your....pressure, poverty, persecution."

A. Pressure: The Greek word thlipsis translated as "afflictions" comes from a root word that means to be crushed. When you think about it, the name of the city itself perfectly describes the church there, because myrrh is produced by crushing the branches of that thorny tree. And in Smyrna, the believers were constantly crushed until the perfume of their suffering filled the city and was a pleasing aroma before the throne of God. But they were under constant pressure because they would not bow down to Caesar, and thereby declare their loyalty to Rome. They refused to burn a pinch of incense on the altar and confess: "Kysar Kurios--Caesar is Lord." It really wasn't so much an act of religious devotion as it was an act of political persuasion, but the Christian said: "No. The title of "Lord" is reserved for one name, and one name alone: "Christos Kurios--Christ is Lord." And the Christian would walk up to the altar before the statue of the spirit of Rome, throw the incense on the ground, and instead of saying Caesar is Lord, they would say: "Christ is Lord!"

And because the Christian refused to burn that pinch of incense, he was a marked man. And because of that, the believers in Smyrna were being crushed under the weight of persecution. Pressure is trouble we have as a result of our identification with Christ, and sometimes its not all bad. God allows pressure, persecution, hardship, and difficulty as you serve Him. Why? Because the church thrives on pressure. Show me a church without pressure and I'll show you a church that is weak, compromising, lifeless and lazy. Show me a church under pressure, and I'll show you a church that has the potential to do great things for God. Why, because it is in the crucible of pressure that the church of the risen Lord thrives, and when the pressure is gone, the life is gone. In fact, I'd trade a hand-full of persecuted Christians from Iraq and Syria, China or the Sudan for a 1,000 pampered Christians from America any day.

But the pressure was constant, and unyielding on the church in Smyrna from the pagan society around them. There was never a moment of relief, never a day off. There was constant, unrelenting pressure to be a Caesar worshipper. And maybe some of you know what that's like to be under constant pressure to conform, to be crushed in a hostile environment at school, or at work, or worse still, in your own home. Amy Johnson Flint wrote: "Pressed out of measure and pressed to all length. Pressed so intensely, it seems beyond strength. Pressed in the body, and pressed in the soul. Pressed in the mind til the dark surges roll. Pressure by foes and pressure by friends, pressure on pressure til life nearly ends. Pressed into loving the staff and the rod, pressed into knowing no helper but God." Christ says: "I know the pressure. I understand what it is to be under the crushing strain of opposition." If there is anyone here serving under pressure, you may feel "I'm standing alone, I bearing the brunt of opposition by myself, and the constant pressure that is about to crush me..." the risen Lord says: "I know what you are going through, because I've been there." He says: "I know that you live with pressure" and then secondly He says: "I know that you live with poverty."

B. Poverty: The word here means abject poverty. In the midst of great prosperity, this church was poor, destitute. Why? Well the loyalists to Rome in Smyrna considered these Christians to be traitors. So the trade unions, which each had patron Roman gods, refused to allow the Christians in. And the citizens boycotted Christian businesses, confiscated Christian properties, and imprisoned Christian owners and workers. So they literally tried to starve out these Christians. Tough to survive in such a hostile environment. But their poverty was a result of their unswerving loyalty to Jesus. But by Jesus' standard, they were a rich church. The believers in Smyrna may not have had any money in the bank, but they sure did have treasure in heaven.

You know its not easy for me to preach on Smyrna. We truly can't appreciate their situation. Not that easy to interest a well fed, well clothed, well housed Sunday morning crowd like us in the kind of loyalty Smyrna had. I have to ask myself: "What has it cost me to be a Christian?" What has it cost you to be a Christian? We sing about the reproach and shame of the cross, then go home to a big dinner and an afternoon nap. What have we given up for Christ? Our Sunday morning, or evening, maybe Wednesday evening? Is that it? Isn't there more? These days the church in America is not interested in the costs of being a Christian only in the benefits. But the church at Smyrna was not obsessed with the benefits, but with their obedience and it resulted in poverty. And Jesus says: "I know what you're going through, I've been there."

C. Persecution: Pressure, Poverty, then thirdly, Persecution (v 9b-10a). Jesus called these Jews "The Synagogue of Satan." Apparently, Jews were still stirring up trouble just as in the days of Paul. False rumors were circulating. People were being turned against the church by this affluent, vocal group of Jews. Are you the subject of slander for the cause of Christ? Is your name reviled? Jesus knew what it was to be slandered. They said: "He's a glutton and a drunk." They said: "He's demon possessed." They said: "He's the product of fornication." They said: "He's a blasphemer." And yet, the Bible says of Jesus that "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." (1 Pet. 2:23) But Jesus says to His suffering church: "I know what it is to endure pressure and poverty and persecution. I know what it is to have the synagogue of Satan nail me to the cross. I know..."

Pressure, Poverty, Persecution, our Lord says "I know, I understand, I identify." But He didn't tell them anywhere in this letter that there would be blue skies and smooth sailing ahead. In fact, He says here that things would get worse. Imprisonment and death were in their future. Some Christians in that day were tortured on the rack, and when they refused to deny Christ and worship Caesar, were literally torn limb from limb. Others were dipped in hot oil and boiled alive, and Nero burned some of them as human torches in his gardens there in Rome. Others were crucified, as the Lord was. Still others were taken to the coliseums and arenas, and wild animals were turned loose and allowed to rip them to shreds and consume them before a wildly cheering crowd. Others were beheaded, like the Apostle James and Paul, like we are seeing now at the hands of ISIS.

All this because the believers there wouldn't worship Caesar. Then notice He gives a time: 10 days (i.e., symbolic that they would be tested fully and completely). They would be tested to the limit, but there was a limit to their testing. There would be an end to it, however severe it would be. And to this suffering church the risen Lord basically has 2 commands: "Be fearless and be faithful." Be fearless and be faithful. First, don't be afraid (v 10). Same words He used with the Apostle John in Rev. 1:17. Suffering, imprisonment, and even death can be endured by drawing on that simple phrase: "Fear not." Someone has said that there are 365 "fear nots" in the Bible, one for every day of the year. Why? David tells us in Psalm 23: "I will fear no evil *for thou art with me.*" That's why. He is with me under pressure, He is with me in poverty, He is with me in persecution. He knows what we're going through and He walks with us every step of the way! So the risen Lord says: "Be fearless," then He says: "Be faithful."

Be faithful. In fact, He says: "Be faithful unto death. Hang in there even if it costs your life. Because here is the payoff. If you'll be faithful unto death, I'll give you a crown of life, and you'll not be touched by the second death." Don't be afraid, be faithful, because there's a crown waiting for you when you get to heaven. And if you are faithful, one of these days you're going to stand before the Lord, and He's going to give you a Crown of life! And you'll proudly lay at His feet as your gift of worship and love to Him. A crown of life, then He says in v 11. Second death.

What do you think the believers were anxious about in Smyrna? Probably asking: "I wonder if this is the day they'll get me. If they get me, I wonder if they'll put me on the rack or boil me in oil or feed me to the wild animals or burn me at the stake or cut off my head or crucify me. I wonder if this is my day to die? And the Lord says: "They may take your life, but they can't take it twice. You'll never be hurt by the second death." And the second death is a Christ-less eternity in a place called hell. Here's how to remember it: "If you're born one, you'll die twice. But if you're born twice, you'll only die once." The risen Lord says: "Listen, if they take your life, they've just ushered you into my presence, then the battle will be over and the victory will be won! You'll not be touched by the second death!"

IV. APPLICATION

Those are wonderful words of encouragement for the future, but let's consider what we can do right now. Scripture calls on us to remember our brothers and sisters in Christ who are persecuted for their faith: "Let brotherly love continue... Remember those who are in prison, as

though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” (Heb. 13:1,3 ESV). Paul reinforces this: “...there are many parts, yet one body.... If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor. 12:20, 26a ESV). What can we do? Let me suggest three things: Pray, Participate, and Promote.

A. Pray for the Persecuted. First of all, pray. Lift up your brothers and sisters before the Lord as they endure unbearable persecution. Paul asked the believers to “Remember my chains” (Col. 4:18). However, do not just pray generically for the persecuted church, pray specifically. Visit the websites of ministries which are pleading the cause of the persecuted and which post stories of men, women, boys and girls who are suffering for Jesus. Read the words and listen to the testimony of the suffering and pray for them, by name. Prayer is a vital way to encourage our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world.

Pray also for their persecutors, as Jesus commanded (Matt. 5:44), that they realize that it is Jesus they are persecuting (Acts 9:4-5), and repent and come to know the grace, forgiveness, and love we know. In the Middle East, thousands of Muslims have encountered Jesus in their dreams and many are coming to Christ. Who knows what God might do in the life of an ISIS persecutor who is converted, perhaps like he did with the Apostle Paul? We need to pray. Pray for the persecuted and for the persecutors. Secondly, we need to participate.

B. Participate in Practical Ministry to the Persecuted. Praying is good, but we must also act to meet real needs. The Lord Jesus speaks forcefully about this in Matt. 25 that we are to minister to those in need, those who are suffering, and those who are in prison, as though we were serving Christ Himself. There are a number of ministries which offer hands-on relief to refugees, victims of violence, and the families of martyrs, such as Samaritan’s Purse, Voice of the Martyrs, Open Doors USA, and many others. Donate to these and other ministries. Volunteer your time to serve. Be the hands and heart of Christ to our brothers and sisters. After all, they are family.

C. Promote Public Policy that Protects the Persecuted. As fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, we ought to stand up and speak out on behalf of the persecuted church around the world. I’m thankful that Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act several years ago, which mandates an annual State Department report on religious freedom and established the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to monitor and advise the U.S. government on how to promote religious freedom around the globe. But we need to enact sanctions against nations which carry out religious persecution. And we need to reevaluate who we do business with as a nation, and what we buy as individuals. And I am thankful that the House of Representatives passed without opposition a resolution declaring the actions of ISIS against Christians and other groups as genocide. And I am grateful the Secretary of State John Kerry and our State Department finally recognized the same, after some of our allies had already done so in Europe. But much more can be done.

See the right to religious freedom is a God given right, and therefore not just an American right, but an international right, it is a basic human right. After the horror of the Holocaust, the international community established protections for religious freedom, first in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and later in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This right is consistent with the religious freedom rights articulated by our First

Amendment, rights that we want to see upheld so that our brothers and sisters around the world are protected from persecution. As Christians, we also want to see this right protected for all, regardless of faith, for this freedom in civil society is motivated by our desire as Christians to “do good” to our neighbor, even those who live a half a world away. While we applaud the State Department’s “genocide” designation on the persecution of Christians by ISIS, more can be done to protect their God-given human rights.

CONCLUSION

Back to the church at Smyrna as we wrap it up. We know the pastor of this church. His name was Polycarp, a disciple, a student of John the Apostle. When Polycarp was 90 years old, persecution intensified in Smyrna, so much so that he had to flee from the city by the help of the members, but the Roman soldiers tracked him down to a farm-house outside town. He then made no attempt to flee when they captured him. In fact, he sent food out to the soldiers, then asked permission to be alone to pray for an hour and meditate on this letter from the Risen Lord that we have before us. At the end of the hour, they grabbed him, chained him, threw him into a cart and brought him before the Roman Proconsul in the coliseum, which was filled with an angry mob of Jews and pagans.

The Proconsul kept pleading with him: "Have respect for your age old man, swear allegiance to Caesar and slander the Christ. Just mouth the words, swear by Caesar and I'll set you free." Then came his immortal reply: "Eighty and six years I have served my Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" So they bound him to the stake, and the Jews gathered the wood even though it was the Sabbath, and as they lit the fire beneath him, he prayed... "Lord Almighty, Father of the blessed Son, I thank thee that you have graciously thought me worthy of this day and this hour, that I may receive a portion in the number of thy martyrs and in the cup of thy Christ." And He literally gave His life for Jesus. He was faithful unto death.

But that is not just a story from the musty, dusty past. There are many today who are doing the same for Jesus. Tony Perkins, President of Family Research Council, tells of meeting with Col. Oliver North had just returned from Erbil in northern, Iraq. Col. North was with some Kurdish freedom fighters who had just defeated a squad of ISIS combatants. One of the spoils was a beaten up TV camera taken from the ISIS war-fighters. Col. North was able to take the disk out, put it in his player and watched it. What he saw disturbed him deeply. He shared it with Tony Perkins, fellow Marine veteran, and General Jerry Boykin, former 3 Star Army commander of Special Forces.

The footage was of a small village in northern Iraq of about 300 people. ISIS surrounded that village and then killed every Christian in it. It took all day, but they rounded up all the families, lined them up, and they placed the fence posts in the ground. Then they took the family, beginning with the smallest child, and impaled each one alive as their family members watched. And when the mothers would reach out for their dying children, their hands were chopped off. And the fathers were crucified as they watched their wives and children being killed – simply because they were Christians.

We are not being called to die for Jesus in America yet, we are simply being called to live for him. So let me ask you, if a group was rounding up Christians to persecute in this community, would there be enough evidence to mark you as one of His? How would they know that you are a follower of Jesus Christ? What would you say if asked: Renounce Christ or die? We need to let it be known who we are and whose we are! That it is Christ we serve, it is Christ we love, it is Christ we follow, and it is to Christ we will be faithful, even if it means suffering and death. That's what our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world are doing, not in theory but in fact. So let's stand with the persecuted, Amen? Yes, pressure awaits those who are loyal to Christ. Poverty awaits those who profess Him as Lord. Persecution awaits those who stand up for Jesus. But hell can't stop us and a crown of life awaits us, if we will be faithful even unto death!

Bow: As night follows day, if you are truly a disciple of Jesus, you will suffer persecution. Perhaps it won't be as severe as what some are experiencing in Iraq and Syria and other parts of the world. But it costs to follow Jesus. What has it cost you? Have you endured pressure, poverty, or persecution for Jesus? Many of our fellow believers around the world have and we need to pray. We need to pray for our brothers and sisters and yes, even for their persecutors. We need to participate in hands on ministry by giving and volunteering. And we need to promote policies that help protect the persecuted. But we cannot protect all Christians from persecution. There will always be suffering for those who follow Jesus. But as Paul says: "I would reckon that the sufferings of this present age are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us." Prayer.

Invitation: How hard it was for the believers in Smyrna to say Jesus is Lord! How hard for believers in Iraq and Syria to stay true to their faith in the face of certain suffering and death. How much easier it would be for you right now to say Jesus is Lord. There's no Roman court or altar to Caesar, no ISIS warrior, only a church full of believers and the Risen Christ who was dead, and is alive, and who stand with you in whatever circumstances and challenges you face. Will you pledge your allegiance to Him as Lord this morning?

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A pastor for 20 years and a pioneer leader in the Values Voter movement, Dr. Kenyn Cureton, former Vice President for Convention Relations for the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, currently serves as Vice President for Church Ministries with the Family Research Council in Washington, DC.

¹ <http://www.religionnews.com/201a6/01/13/2015-worst-year-christian-persecution-says-open-doors/>

² https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjvpubx5OjLAhWHlx4KHazyAAcQFggjMAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.opendoorsusa.org%2Ffile_viewer.php%3Fid%3D1453&usg=AFQjCNFuJrSznPmLNsw_nkCH7TTI3ZU7jQ&sig2=QziZM3ym1vWfnvYXzVdvEQ

³ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/newsroom/press-releases/tag-news-post/persecution-of-christians-reaches-historic-levels-conditions-suggest-worst-is-yet-to-come/>

⁴ <http://time.com/3718470/isis-copts-egypt/>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamicstate-killings-idUSKBN0NA01E20150420>

⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/27/asia/pakistan-lahore-deadly-blast/>

⁶ <http://www.christianpost.com/news/north-korea-publicly-executes-80-prisoners-crimes-include-possessing-bibles-108651/>

⁷ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/north-korea/>

⁸ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/tag-blog-post/killing-of-christians-in-nigeria-has-increased-by-62/>

⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/christian-enclave-in-india-fears-violence-tension-after-religious-conversions/2014/12/17/4a144784-846b-11e4-abc5-5a3d7b3b20b8_story.html

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj5JvqhTWm4>.

¹¹ *Genocide against Christians in the Middle East: A report submitted to Secretary of State John Kerry by the Knights of Columbus and In Defense of Christians*, March 9, 2016, 10-11. Hereafter Genocide Report. Online at <http://indefenseofchristians.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Genocide-report.pdf>.