Responding To Persecution

(How To Pray For The Persecuted And The Persecutors)

By Kim Butts

According to the international ministry Open Doors, more than 200 million Christians are being persecuted worldwide for their faith in Jesus Christ. There were more people martyred for their faith in the 20th century than in all the previous nineteen combined. Yet, Christians in the U.S. do not really have a clear concept of true persecution. We don't see the big picture that God has for us that embraces Christ's death, burial and resurrection. His picture includes the suffering of His saints, punctuated by the agonizing death of His Son. He asks us to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, enduring the suffering of Jesus. Paul said, *"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted…"* (2 Timothy 3:12).

Persecution is something the Church in the U.S. does not truly understand. No one in their right mind *enjoys* suffering! We pray to be comfortable and secure as we ask God for protection and safety. There is nothing wrong with those prayers…as long as we understand that there may be times when we are called upon to pay the price of following Jesus. We have not truly comprehended the cost that is required of us in Scripture – to die to our selfishness and lay down our very lives for others as we live out the life of Jesus. Many of our churches are stagnant and lifeless – a reflection of the passionless existence of our comfortable lifestyles.

A time may be coming when much more will be required of God's people if the Name of Jesus is to be lifted high. The Church around the world is exploding in growth – not because they do not suffer…but because they do! The Gospel is advancing because unbelievers see the sacrifice that believers are willing to make for their faith. They see that those who claim Jesus as Savior and Lord do not back down in the face of threats, or injury, or even death. Believers around the world clearly understand the cost of their allegiance to the Lord. And the Church is growing in response to their faithfulness… and their sacrifice.

Becoming Aware of the Persecuted

How can we, as families, be aware of those who are suffering greatly all over the world because they believe the words of Jesus, *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5:10)? How can we raise the awareness of our children to pray for those who are bullied, harassed, maltreated, discriminated against, robbed, beaten, imprisoned, threatened, and even killed for their faith in Jesus Christ? The most important way is for them to see that you are willing to go through trials for your faith. If you are not, I strongly urge you to seek the Lord for His strength to do so! Your children will not embrace what you do not believe or are not willing to practice! In addition, here are some other things that we should be teaching our children and grandchildren so that they will develop hearts of compassion and desire to cry out to God and to act on behalf of the persecuted:

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Teach children that suffering for Jesus is part of our Christian walk if we truly are committed to living like Him…but that God still has the victory! *"I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).

We do not want our children to be afraid of suffering for Jesus! They need to know that in due course, we will triumph over any trial or difficulty, because Jesus has already paid the ultimate penalty. Because of His act upon the cross, our suffering has purpose and meaning. Because of His resurrection and the promise of eternal life, our suffering is only temporary. We will have heaven as our definitive reward because of Jesus' redemptive act upon the cross. Our human suffering is not useless or meaningless! God is using it to refine and train us, and to draw the lost to Himself as they see that Christians can rejoice in the midst of their trials, knowing that His plans and purposes are for His glory and fame to be made known to all the ends of the earth!

We need to train our children to be aware of the calling Jesus has placed upon our lives, and that sometimes, our Christian walk will mean that we are persecuted for His sake: *"In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted…"* (2 Timothy 3:12).

If kids learn that others might make fun of them or call them names for being a Christian, they can also learn how to respond in appropriate ways that will demonstrate love instead of retaliation or anger. Here are some Scriptures to reinforce a godly response to persecution:

• *"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…"* (Matthew 5:44).

• *"…When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it…"* (1 Corinthians 4:12).

• *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse"* (Romans 12:14).

• *"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed"* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

• *"Blessed are you when people 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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you"* (Matthew 5:11-12).

Teach children that God is merciful and good in the midst of suffering. God desires us to show mercy to those who persecute us: *"But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful"* (Luke 6:35-36). We are able to love others and show mercy because our Father is loving and merciful. It is only through His power that we are able to conquer our natural inclination to fight back or to get revenge. What we need to understand as a family is that Satan will do anything to persuade or tempt us to retaliate towards those who persecute us. It is only when we take deeply into our hearts the desire of the Father for us to be merciful overcomers that we can truly demonstrate His love and power to those who treat us unkindly. Our Lord is far more powerful than the worldly temptations of the devil: *"…because the One who*

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is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4b). *"…for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God"* (1 John 5:4-5).

Prayer is the Key!

Teach children how to pray for those who are persecuted for the sake of Christ. We can help them to focus on those who experience persecution by letting them see and hear the stories of persecuted believers…especially children. This will help to reach their young hearts to feel compassion for the oppressed as they learn in a very real way what the oppressed are going through. One of the best ways to do this is to have them read (or read to them) information and stories such as this one:

Ruth, a 10-year old Christian, lives in a country in Central Asia. Ruth's father is the pastor of a church that meets in Ruth's house. Most of the people in Ruth's town are Muslims. Some of them learned the truth about Jesus from Ruth's family. But other Muslims were angry when the church began to grow. Very late one night, someone started a fire in Ruth's backyard. They set the fire on purpose. Whoever started it was probably trying to stop Ruth's father from preaching the truth. The fire spread to the house church, and then it was put out. In the morning, church members began to rebuild the church and repair the damage.

The house church wasn't the only place where Ruth's family was persecuted for their faith. Ruth's schoolteacher hit her just because she is a Christian. For the same reason, Ruth's brother and sister get poor grades, even when they do good work. When Ruth told friends at school about Jesus, they cursed at her.

Ruth's favorite Bible story is about Noah because, "Noah was alone when he trusted in God. It took him a long time to build his boat. People told him he was crazy and had a broken mind. He continued to tell the truth and to tell them to believe in God. He was alone, but he was victorious. He was saved." As Ruth follows Christ at school, she may sometimes feel alone like Noah. But she is not alone. Many Christians in Central Asia are also persecuted for their faith.

This story is from *Link*, a children's E-Magazine from Voice of the Martyrs. Similar stories can be found on their website at: *www.linkingup.com*. *Link* is an eight page quarterly for children published by The Voice of the Martyrs. Each issue highlights a nation where the gospel message is restricted and features news and information about the culture of the highlighted country. The website for more information on Voice of the Martyrs is *www.persecution.com*.

Other ministries such as Caleb Project (*www.calebproject.org*) and Viva Network (*www.viva.org*) provide information and resources to help families understand how to pray for and help children and families who are persecuted. According to the Viva Network, a ministry that joins Christians all over the world to pray for and act on behalf of persecuted and at risk children, "There are more than 34 million refugees and internally displaced people worldwide: people uprooted by conflict, oppression or persecution. Approximately 80% of these displaced people are women and children. Children are among the most vulnerable members of any displaced population, and are often the earliest and most frequent victims of violence, disease and malnutrition, which can accompany it. Each day 5,000 children become refugees, whilst

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one in every 230 persons in the world is a child or adolescent who has been forced to flee his or her home." Many of these children and their families are victims of religious persecution.

After reading stories, testimonies, and prayer needs from websites, magazines, the newspaper, etc., pray together as a family for the children and/or families whose stories you are now familiar with. Pray by name for those whose names are mentioned. Pray for the governments who advocate persecution of Christians, and for nations who are undergoing tremendous suffering because of the intolerance of such oppressive leaders and administrations. Pray that the Church will thrive and grow in the midst of suffering! Pray that children will be protected from harm and that families will remain strong and intact.

Teach children to become the answers to their prayers. Prayer is the most powerful act we can bring to bear upon the situation of worldwide persecution. When we pray, the Lord can intervene in the lives of persecuted people living across the world, or even in our own neighborhoods. God can use our families to make an impact upon those who are suffering, no matter where they live. He can answer our prayers to protect Ruth and her family in Central Asia, and also use us as His instruments of mercy for those who are in need in our own communities.

Determine as a family to be used by God in whatever way He shows you. Prepare to be willing to endure suffering for the cause of Christ when it comes your way.

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