

#PrayOhio! Sunday, June 7 SBC Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

In addition to our call to prayer prompts for the First Friday Fast 2020, Ohio Baptists are being encouraged to join with Southern Baptist churches everywhere in praying for the persecuted church. In recognition of the persecution faced by Christians around the world, the Southern Baptist Convention last year designated the first Sunday in June as a **Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**. In 2020, the day of prayer is Sunday, June 7.

Open Doors reports 260 million Christians experience high levels of persecution in the top 50 countries on their World Watch List 2019. On average, eight Christians died every day for their faith in 2019. In addition, 9,488 churches or Christian buildings were attacked, and 3,711 Christians were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, and imprisoned. In an article at Christianity Today, Ed Stetzer prompts Christians in the West to become more aware of what is happening to fellow believers overseas, *“It’s not just discomfort, it’s not just harassment, it’s not just mistreatment, it’s the kind of ‘fiery trial’ that Peter spoke of in 1 Peter 4:12—one that endangers believer’s economic stability, safety, and sometimes even their very lives.”* For the complete article, go to (christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2018/september/china-on-my-mind-why-we-all-must-care.html)

For some, persecution comes from a government that is opposed to Christianity. In these countries, it might be illegal to gather for worship, evangelize, or even to convert to Christianity. More subtle forms of government persecution include expensive permits or difficult requirements for church buildings or rentals. The government might also deny visas and passports to church leaders who persist in spreading their faith. For believers in other countries, persecution comes not from the government but from the local community, and sometimes even family members. In both types of persecution, the threat of physical violence is real.

From the New Testament, it seems clear that persecution was common for first-century Christians (Acts 14:22, 2 Timothy 3:12). Even today, Nik Ripken observes that 70% of the world’s Christians who are practicing their faith live in persecution. Although most of us do not face the persecutions experienced by believers in other parts of the world, praying for persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ should be a regular part of our lives. Paul Chitwood, president of the IMB, has said that prayer is *“the greatest act of compassion we could perform for our brothers and sisters around the globe who are enduring persecution.”*

This year many of us have seen our churches close their doors for safety reasons. We have not been allowed to gather in large groups. As we have worshipped in our homes, we have been given a taste of the typical experience for many persecuted believers around the world. Let us be reminded of the hardships they face daily, and of the great risk they take each time they gather for worship. (For a recent article written by a missionary in Central Asia go to imb.org/2020/04/14/current-situation-consider-persecuted-church/)

Keeping ourselves aware of the difficult circumstances of believers around the world moves our hearts to pray. Learning about our brothers’ and sisters’ endurance in the faith incites us to thank God for how He is doing a work in them for His glory among the nations. Following the patterns in Scripture, we can learn to pray for persecuted believers in meaningful and God-honoring ways.

The prayers of Paul, in particular, help us grow in our ministry to support persecuted believers. In his letters, he teaches that praying for each other is a critical task of the church. One of his model prayers is for the believers in Thessalonica who were suffering severe persecution.

With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ. — 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Rather than praying for relief from persecution, Paul prays for their holiness and God's glory. We must recognize then that God has a purpose for persecution. We must trust that in His sovereignty, God will accomplish greater works through persecution to His glory. Nik Ripkin notes the same prayer request of the modern-day persecuted believers. *"Much to our surprise, believers in persecution, did not ask us to pray that their persecution would cease. Instead, they begged us to pray that they would be obedient through their suffering. And that is a very different prayer."* (*Insanity of Obedience*, p. 34)

Finally, Paul also asks for prayer for himself as a persecuted servant of Christ. His request is simple. In 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2, he asks for prayer that the word of the Lord would be spread and that he and his colleagues would be delivered from evil people. His first priority is that the Good News of Jesus would spread. He was willing to face and endure hardship throughout his ministry for the sake of the gospel. And he asks for deliverance from *"wicked and evil people"* only so that the gospel may spread more widely. IMB President Paul Chitwood affirmed the necessity of intercessory prayer on behalf of Christians and missionaries suffering for their faith and the task of proclaiming the gospel of salvation. *"We ask God to give them courage and hope,"* Chitwood said. *"We know that their temporary suffering will be rewarded in eternity and pray that it will result in many being saved from among the nations."* (For an article on IMB missionaries who have suffered persecution, go to imb.org/2020/04/20/june-7-day-prayer-persecuted/)

Please consider setting aside some time this Sunday, with your family or with your church to learn about persecuted believers and to earnestly pray for them. Then make a habit to pray regularly for our brothers and sisters in Christ in difficult places around the world.

—written by Drew and Sarah Smyth* (**Due to security names changed*)

Websites for information on praying for the persecuted church:

- erlc.com/resource-library/articles/by-topic/persecution
- imb.org/pray
- nikripken.com
- opendoorsusa.org
- persecution.com

For additional reading:

Insanity of Obedience by Nik and Ruth Ripken

Lives Given, Not Taken: 21st Century Southern Baptist Martyrs by Erich Bridges and Jerry Rankin

Not Forgotten: Inspiring Missionary Pioneers by David Brady