

15 Reasons Why Everybody Needs to Encounter the Persecuted Church

Introduction

The question was asked in a seminar recently, “Why does God allow a part of His church to be persecuted?” Someone answered, “So that the other part of the church might remember what true Christianity looks like!”

Beneath this overstatement lies an important and perhaps unexploited truth; persecuted Christians can be an important model for the revitalization of the faith of other Christians, particularly for those in the Western world. Their faith can literally change our faith. Persecuted Christians are full of insights and understandings about God, His Word, prayer and many other aspects of discipleship. Serving them by sending them resources is not the only relationship we have to them. We have a responsibility to listen and learn from them. And who knows, it might be that an encounter with the Persecuted Church is essential to living a balanced Christian life in the West.

A mega-church pastor returned from a visit to China in 2002 saying, “I will never again assume that what my Christian culture taught me was true, which was that personal peace and affluence equals the favor of God, because I have seen great saints in constant trouble and in great poverty, yet God is with them.”

Of course, not all the persecuted live model Christian lives. Some in their ignorance go to extremes. Some court martyrdom with inappropriate zeal. Some compromise and fail to witness to the power of the Gospel. Persecuted Christians have much to learn from Western Christians, just as we have much to learn from them. Nevertheless, with a drop of discernment, there may be much we can incorporate into our own spiritual lives from an encounter with the persecuted.

The following articles give reasons why Western Christians felt it was important to their faith to encounter the Persecuted Church. Sometimes these reasons are profound. Sometimes just personal. Some even whimsical. But they build up into a solid body of testimony that ministering to the persecuted is an exciting two-way street—they have as much to teach us as we them.

This is a critical focus of the ministry of Open Doors. We are not content with asking a number of Western Christians to assist the persecuted. We wish to tell every Western Christian that it is vital for their own faith that they encounter the persecuted! It is hoped that these testimonies will make that case.

15 Reasons Why Everybody Needs to Encounter the Persecuted Church

By Ron Boyd-MacMillan

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I need to encounter the persecuted because...

1. They remind me that God does not build His kingdom on my achievements, but on my sacrifices.
2. They spur me to appreciate the privilege of corporate worship, and stop me from complaining about my church so much.
3. They challenge me to realize my debt to the heroism of my own spiritual ancestors.
4. It gives me hope when all I'm hearing is bad news every day in the media.
5. It shows me that the fight for religious freedom is never won, even in my own land.
6. They help me to interpret my Bible better.
7. They help to take away my fear of death.
8. They stop me making God "safe!"
9. They help me to remember that deliverance comes through endurance.
10. They show us that you don't have to be perfect to do the will of God.
11. They remind me of the need to sing to my spirit.
12. They help to keep my faith simple.
13. They help me to love mystery.
14. They help me to remember that I am always in a fight.
15. They show me that the will of God always gets done because He turns obstacles into instruments!

1. They remind me that God does not build His kingdom on my achievements, but on my sacrifices.

I used to live in Los Angeles where I was always stressed about one key question—am I fulfilling my potential? Everywhere I drove, I was surrounded by advertisements telling me that I was not earning enough, that I needed to have an “attitude transplant.” I worried about whether I should take more courses in the elusive search for more success. All my friends were actors and actresses desperate to attract the attention of some film producer and working a couple of part-time jobs in the vain hope that someday they would be discovered. I even got quite depressed when others prospered and I seemed to stand still in my career. In other words, I always felt unfulfilled.

But is the purpose of my life really to maximize my potential? A visit to the persecuted soon cured me of that idea. This fact becomes clear—fulfilling one’s potential cannot possibly be the purpose to life because so few actually get the opportunity to do so!

Look at the millions of Christians in China’s house churches. All of them live lives in which, for want of a better term, they are trapped. They do not have choices. Because of their Christianity, many are denied access to education, or are barred from developing promising careers. I sat in a house church of seventy peasant Christians and wondered, “How many great scientists, violin players, or philosophers could be in here; but they and the world will never know, because they never had the chance to study, learn algebra, or hold a musical instrument.”

Would God really make a world where only a tiny minority could fulfill their life’s purpose, and doom the rest of us to a lifetime of frustration?

We were studying 1 Peter that night, and suddenly I had an insight while reading Chapter 2 verse 5, “...now God is building you, as living stones into His spiritual temple. What’s more, you are God’s holy priests, who offer the spiritual sacrifices that please Him because of Jesus Christ.”

It struck me: God makes each life that is yielded to Him a living stone in building His temple. That’s why we are alive. That’s the purpose of it all. We are all made to become a stone in His spiritual temple, His eternal kingdom. And everybody gets the opportunity to become a “living stone” just by virtue of giving our lives to Him. We are priests because we offer a sacrifice. That sacrifice is the only one we can make—that of our lives. And so we find the purpose for which God made the world—to build a kingdom of worshippers for Himself.

No one goes unfulfilled because God builds His kingdom on our sacrifices, not on our achievements. We are priests sacrificing our lives, and becoming living stones. Few of us actually have the opportunity to achieve. But all of us have the opportunity to give Jesus the sacrifice of our lives. And what wonderful equality. Every member of that house church, no matter how ignorant, poor, or unfulfilled professionally, was a living stone in the kingdom. Billy Graham is a living stone. Martin Luther King is a living stone. But I, too, am a living stone. That old man in the house church whose back is bent double from a life in the rice paddies is a living stone. That woman whose baby was taken away during the Cultural Revolution because she was a Christian is also a living stone. No one wastes their life who gives it to Jesus. They are placed into an eternal structure—the Kingdom of God, and will rejoice forever in that status.

Sure I still fret from time to time about whether I am making the most of my gifts. But I sit more loosely with the stress. God has made me a living stone, and I don't need to worry. Even if I had achievements, they would soon be forgotten. Thank God He takes our sacrifices, because then everyone gets fulfilled. And not just the few that achieve. Trust God to include everybody. There are no exams, or elites, in the Kingdom of God. The suffering church taught me that!

2. They spur me to appreciate the privilege of corporate worship, and stop me from complaining about my church so much.

It's so easy to get fed up with church. For years I got very little out of church. The sermons were boring. The music was embarrassing. The fellowship was nonexistent. The whole experience of worshipping with other people felt stale and pointless. And it was. I'm not exaggerating out of bitterness. Going to church in my country was an endurance test.

Until I visited a Persecuted Church!

There were fifty of us squeezed into an upstairs room. The singing was hushed. The neighbors were hostile to the fellowship. Then a preacher stood up; an old man, with a wiry frame and wisps of hair springing from a mole on his chin. No sooner had he spoken a sentence than he broke down in tears. He kept saying, "I never thought I would have the privilege of preaching again." Then he would laugh, then cry again, great wails and sobs. Soon everyone was weeping with him. Except me. This went on for about half an hour, and I began to get very fed up with it all. He kept speaking a line, and my translator kept saying, "It's the same verse, it's the same verse." All this man did was to repeat the same Scripture phrase, burst into tears, laugh, and then speak the very same phrase again. I thought to myself, "What kind of hopeless service is this?"

But afterward I met the old man, and when I heard his story I repented of my attitude.

He was a preacher, ordained in the late 1950's in China. He pastored a church for only six months before it was closed down. He was jailed, spending twenty years in prison. After he got out, he was very ill for a long time; but finally, at aged 77, he had the strength to speak again.

I had witnessed his first sermon in 31 years! No wonder he broke down. I tried to imagine what it must have been like, holding the word of God in for 31 years, not knowing whether you would ever again preach. Then suddenly being allowed to do so. How do you preach a sermon after a silence of 31 years? No wonder he was overcome.

He said, "I never thought I would get the privilege of speaking the word to a gathered group of Christians with their Bibles open ever again. Through the long years of prison I thought that experience would never return. And when it came, as you saw, all I could do was choke out the verse that kept me going : "Sing His praises in the assembly of the faithful" (Ps. 149:1b).

I returned home to my church with a transformed attitude. I began to walk to church with my Bible, praising Him for the freedom. I went to the church early, walking the aisles and praying, thanking God for the building and the freedom to hold our service. When the preacher spoke, I thanked God that he had no fear. When the Bible was read, I thanked God for the men who took grave risks in the past to print and distribute this word in my language. When we sang a hymn, I sang out loudly, thanking God that I did not have to whisper in hushed tones.

Truly, what a privilege is corporate worship. I stopped complaining at how poor the experience was and rejoiced at the sheer privilege of gathering without fear. The suffering church rescued me from bitterness, and taught me to count my blessings, especially the ones I had taken for granted.

3. They challenge me to realize my debt to the heroism of my own spiritual ancestors.

It was in the early 1980's, in a village in Czechoslovakia, and I had just given the pastor of the rural church a Bible in his own tongue. It was leather bound, with a gold zipper, and was the first complete Bible he had held. I remember him sniffing it, marveling at the leather smell, playing with the zipper and being almost afraid to touch the thin precious pages. Then he began to talk to the members of the church. Pointing at me he said, "This gentleman is your heroic spiritual ancestor. Every time the Bible comes into a culture, it is a threat, and is opposed. So it takes men and women to risk all to bring it to us. This man has taken such a risk." I was embarrassed, but he went on to say to me, "The Bible also came into your culture. It was also a threat. Tell me, who are your heroic spiritual ancestors?" I am ashamed to say I did not have a clear idea of who these men were in my country of the United Kingdom. I remembered vaguely the names of John Wycliffe and William Tyndale, but I had no real recollection of the details.

So I returned to my country with his challenge ringing in my ears: "Find out the story of how your Bible came to you, and you will discover your heroic spiritual ancestors."

What a dramatic story I uncovered. It was full of spies, deaths and power politics. This is not the place to go into it all, but I learned so much about John Wycliffe, the first man to translate the Bible into English in the world of the 1300's, when most clergy could not even recite the Ten Commandments. He formed a cadre of guerilla preachers to comb the country, with hand-copied versions of the Bible, to spread the true word of God. Most were arrested. The Bible was banned by Parliament. Wycliffe died of a stroke from the strain. Even after he died, he was not left alone. In 1428, his bones were disinterred from consecrated ground, and with the Primate of England looking on, his ashes scattered from a bridge into the river Swift, a tributary of the river Avon. But a prophesy sprang up:

"The Avon to the Severn runs
The Severn to the Sea
And Wycliffe's dust shall spread abroad
Wide as the waters be."

That came true in the 1500's with William Tyndale who benefited from the invention of the printing press. He said to a cleric who was dissuading him from his task of translating, "Ere many years, I will cause the boy who drives the plough to know more of the Bible than thou dost."

He had to leave England to do it though, never to return. While only 29, in 1524, he settled in Cologne, and by 1526 was ready to smuggle 6000 copies of the Bible in English into Britain. The whole British naval fleet was put on alert, and boats were stopped and searched. First tens and then hundreds of the Bibles got through. The bishop of London tried another tack. He sought to buy the entire print run through an intermediary. His intention was to burn them all. Tyndale got wind of it, and approved the sale, saying, "Oh he will burn them. Well, I am the gladder, for I shall get the money from these books, and the whole world shall cry out upon the burning of God's word." And so it was. He burned them, and Tyndale used the money to improve the translation and print more...at the church's expense.

Tyndale's work formed 85 percent of the King James Bible. "The noise of the new Bible echoed throughout the country," said Tyndale. It was pocket-sized, easy to conceal, and thus went everywhere. The theological heavyweights of the church railed against it. Thomas More scorned it as, "putting the fire of Scripture into the language of plow boys." Tyndale was captured by assassins and then strangled and burned in August 1536 for "heresy."

His last words were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." This prayer was swiftly answered, and the English reformation was quickly fueled by a spate of translations. The Coverdale Bible (translated from a German Bible) in 1535 was the first legal Bible. In 1537 the Matthew's Bible was published, an amalgam of the Tyndale and Coverdale Bibles, then in 1539 came the Great Bible, placed in every church. Three Bibles in six years. So many were there that King James had to authorize a special standard version in 1611.

What a story it was. And what heroism from my spiritual ancestors. I told a Korean friend of my experience, and he went back to South Korea to find out how the Bible came into his culture. He was amazed to come across the story of a Welsh Missionary to China, R.J. Thomas, who was burdened to see the Koreans come to know the Lord. At that time no one could visit Korea. It was a hermit kingdom. But Thomas joined an American ship, the SS General Sherman that was making an exploratory passage to see if the United States could trade with Korea. The trip was a disaster. The ship was attacked, and the crew and passengers clubbed to death as they waded to shore. Thomas was killed, but the man who clubbed him to death felt he had killed a good man because Thomas had not emerged fighting with a sword in his hands, but with books. His murderer took the books, dried them, but was unable to read the Chinese. Since paper was expensive, he glued them to the outside of his house. Soon scholars came flocking from far and wide, their long nails tracing the text, reading his "walls." One of these scholars became a Christian, and within a generation his son had translated the New Testament into Korean. Another heroic ancestor.

So the persecuted spurred me to connect afresh, and respect all the more, my spiritual ancestors. We forget them at our peril. When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey, visited China in 1994, he rebuked Bible smugglers as "troublemakers." Upon his return to the UK the press informed him that he had made these remarks on the 400th anniversary of the birth of William Tyndale. To his credit, he was careful not to make the same mistake again in his tenure as Archbishop. The world still has need of the likes of Tyndale. Who knows, perhaps you or I might be called to such an illustrious ministry.

4. It gives me hope when all I'm hearing is bad news every day in the media.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have an idea of what God is really up to in this world?

One thing we can be very sure of: that the story of the world as we find it in history books and newspapers is not to be confused with the real story of what God is doing *underneath*. Someone once said that history is "His story." But that's nonsense. The two are not the same, or else why would Christ describe the growth of the kingdom as a "secret." Underneath what we call history and read about all the time—the antics of celebrities, the discoveries of scientists, and the power politics of the dominant empires of the moment—God is somehow, somewhere, building His kingdom. That's the real reason there is a universe in the first place.

But what is God's story as opposed to history? What's He really up to? Must the daily diet of wars, murder and mayhem in my newspaper always get me down? Can I ever be sure something is going on underneath? Well, we can't know perfectly as "His ways are so much higher than our ways" (Isa. 55:9). But we are afforded glimpses. This glimpsing really excited the early Christians. You can hear the delight in Paul when he writes, "God's secret plan has now been revealed to us..." (Eph. 1:9). The persecuted seem to get more glimpses than most.

I think of China. The headlines said in June of 1989 a terrible massacre took place. Five thousand young people were mown down by the Chinese army. The headlines all mourned the death of the pro-democracy movement. It was terrible, but what was God up to underneath? Out of that massacre came a remarkable turning to Christ among China's students for the first time in history! The headlines never saw it. It's not part of history. But "His story" went on.

I think of Afghanistan. When the Soviet Union invaded that country in 1980, the world was outraged. The headlines were all full of fierce denunciations of the action, and rightly so. But I remember meeting a missionary from Kabul who said, "Yes, what the Russians did was wrong, but the fact is it is now much easier under the Russians for Christians to evangelize than it was before under the Islamic regime." Again, another more significant story, of God building His kingdom, was going on undetected by the world at large.

I think of Sudan. The headlines in the 1980's were full of a dreadful civil war which isolated the Dinka people from the outside world. It was terrible. There was untold suffering on a vast scale. But underneath, God was bringing the two million Dinkas to Himself. By 1993, 80 percent of them were Christians and this among a tribe that was historically very resistant to the Gospel.

Notice that these are all stories from the persecuted. They seem to be better placed to notice the real story. And so I need to keep in touch with them because this glimpse delivers me from despair. In 1989, in China, there was not just a massacre, but a revival. In 1980, in Afghanistan, there was not just an occupation, but new missionary opportunities. In Sudan, over the last twenty years, there was not just a brutal war that killed two million people, but a new kingdom of believers erected among a people who never knew Jesus before.

So every day when I open my newspaper, I remind myself of two things—thanks to the persecuted: that the story I see is not to be confused with the *kingdom story*; and that underneath even the saddest news, God is surely up to something good. There is hope because God is always at work.

5. It shows me that the fight for religious freedom is never won, even in my own land.

As my plane touched down after a trip to the Middle East, I breathed a big sigh of relief. I was back where I did not have to watch my back, or be careful what I said, or where I went. Whew. I was back in a country that had religious freedom. I prayed to God, "Thank you for the men and women who fought to bring me this freedom." Thank God they won.

Then a couple of incidents happened that made me think again.

I was at an art exhibition and looking at a painting entitled "Man Startled on a Horse." I sought out the artist and said, "Was that the apostle Paul on the Damascus road you were depicting?" I thought he would be pleased I had figured it out. But he looked horrified, and glancing around he hissed, "For goodness sake keep quiet. Do you want me to get labeled as a religious artist? I'd never sell another painting if that happened."

In the same week, I watched an interview with the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. The interviewer, David Frost, casually lobbed in this question at the end of a grilling regarding the policy toward Iraq: "Do you pray with President Bush?" Blair, reportedly a devout Christian, blinked and said, "What you do mean pray?" Frost replied, "You know, pray to God like Christians do." Obviously calculating that his ratings would dive if he admitted he prayed, Blair said shortly, "Mr. Bush works for peace in his way, and I work for peace in my way."

Suddenly I became aware that I had to fight for religious liberty in my own country. I had thought that because certain toleration laws were in place, I was safe. But no, it was clear from the artist, and the Prime Minister, that to admit one's Christian faith in a public context was professional suicide. How did my society suddenly get so prejudiced?

It was a persecuted Christian in Palestine who gave me the eyes to see that religious freedom always needs protection, wherever one is. She said, "Freedom is fragile. Religious freedom is not about having the right laws to protect belief—that's a myth put out by the human rights community. No, religious freedom is protected not by laws, but by a climate of respect and openness that ensures the laws are correctly applied. A toleration law, for example, can be used for or against Christians. Christians always have to fight to ensure the climate is tolerant." She added, "I don't care what state you live in, you also live in a culture that hates Christ. That's your fight, and every Christian on the earth has the same fight, whether you belong to a so-called Christian society or not."

She was right. A climate of prejudice against Christians has crept up by stealth in Western cultures, even in apparently Christian ones. We are in a battle even in our own backyard. Thank you Persecuted Church for awakening me to the fight.

6. They help me to interpret my Bible better.

"The Bible is not an easy book to interpret," said my New Testament professor, "otherwise why would we have fought so many wars over its meaning?" And I remember my Church History professor shaking his head and saying ruefully, "One of the saddest features of church history must be that it was over the doctrine of the Lord's Supper that Christians shed the most blood."

Every pastor knows it is hard to understand the meaning of Scripture. They labor to learn languages, look up concordances, and consult commentaries, all in the hope of shedding more light on the key questions of interpretation:

- Who wrote this text and what did they mean by it?
- Who initially read this text and what did they make of it?

All good interpretation begins with the tools that answer these two primary questions. We are taught that these tools lie in the realm of scholarship, and most pastors take to their studies and their libraries accordingly.

But there is another vitally overlooked tool that gives the key to the meaning of the Scriptures--the Persecuted Church!

The Persecuted Church of today represents the closest we can come to the original writers and readers of the Scriptures. You see, most of the Bible was written *by* persecuted people *for* persecuted people. By interacting with them, we gain unique insights into the original meaning of the Scriptures. We really need their help because what is obvious to a persecuted, biblical Christian is no longer obvious to us. We inhabit a completely different universe. We need the persecuted to remind us of what life was like for the original New Testament community.

There are three key characteristics that persecuted Christians of today share with the biblical church, and which we emphatically know nothing of.

Persecuted Christians have no future. Having a future is a luxury that most persecuted Christians do not enjoy, either in the biblical period or today. They have no **long term**.

What they read and use, they use in the moment. They need to hear from God urgently because tomorrow their life may be required of them. And they live and act without regard for consequences. How different to us, who demand so much ministry on how to live in the world long term. This was just not an issue that interested the biblical Christian.

Persecuted Christians have no stake in their society. We live in a world where the church was (and in some cases still is) privileged; where Christian language and concepts have shaped our history, and where individual Christians can hold high office. We are comfortable, well-connected, and prosperous. But biblical persecuted Christians were always on the outside of the power structure. Peter called them, "strangers and aliens." The Scripture is written for powerless people.

Persecuted Christians live in societies dominated by religious rituals. This is what gets them into trouble — they do not worship the "emperor." Even in atheistic societies, the persecuted are in conflict because they do not worship the "gods" of the age, whether the god is Mao, Lenin or Castro. But we, on the other hand, live in worlds where the role of religion has been relegated to the private sphere.

We are not required, like our biblical persecuted brethren, to take oaths of allegiance and fealty to state gods or other gods.

Thus, the persecuted enable us in some small way to recover the "original eyes" of the first writers and readers of Scripture, and that can make all the difference to a correct or an incorrect interpretation.

I remember a dear pastor from the West preaching about Jesus stilling the storm (Mark 4:35-41). His whole talk was on how Jesus could still the storms raging in our lives. He named storms like loneliness, misunderstanding, humiliation, persecution even. And he said, "Jesus can deliver you from every one of these storms, just like He did the disciples of old."

He was about to go on when an old man stood up. He was from a Middle Eastern country and had seen much suffering. He said gently and respectfully, "My dear brother, if you had been persecuted you would know the primary meaning of this passage. The point of this story is not that Jesus takes the storm away, but that there is no need to fear the storm if Jesus is in the boat." Everyone stared at him in silence. He added, "This passage is given to us for our comfort in the face of terrible storms, to know that Jesus is in the boat with us so that the storm will do us no harm."

Not many appreciated the interruption. But some years later, at seminary studying this passage, I saw the value of his insight. Mark's Gospel was not written to Christians who were being *delivered*, but to comfort those who were dying. It was written to the persecuted Christians of Rome who were being martyred by the hundreds under Nero. How would they have interpreted this passage? Surely not that they would get delivered out of the mouth of the lion. They didn't. They died in the arenas. But this passage would have spoken to them even so—they would know that with Jesus, the storm of death would do them no harm.

Even the passage itself makes this clear. Jesus is astonished because the disciples have little faith. They just do not realize who He is. If they did, they would not fear the storm.

So that persecuted Christian—*because* he was persecuted—knew the meaning of the passage better than the preacher, because he was the one for whom the passage was written.

What a fantastic opportunity we have then. As we interact with the persecuted, our own Bible becomes clearer. They give us eyes to interpret the Scriptures, which were originally written more for people like them than for people like us.

Of course, the persecuted are not a foolproof tool for understanding the Scriptures. We still need our scholars, our commentaries, and our Bible dictionaries. But do not overlook the aid of the persecuted in interpreting the sacred text of Scripture, for they, far more than us, are linked to the world of our biblical ancestors.

7. They help to take away my fear of death.

There is a famous book called "The Denial of Death" by Ernest Becker. It is his contention that the whole of the western world is really a gigantic playground to distract us from ever facing the fact that we will all die!

Thinking about death is all but forbidden. Preparing for it is seen as a sign of morbidity. We arrange for the elderly to die out of sight in nursing homes and hospitals. Huge multinational companies are dedicated to producing products that promise to keep the effects of aging at bay, from anti-wrinkle creams to plastic surgery.

Modern people think that there is no greater tragedy in the modern world than to die before becoming old. When Princess Diana was killed in 1997, I remember my friends muttering in disbelief, "How can she die at 36 years of age? No one should die at 36."

But an encounter with the persecuted can go a long way toward diffusing this sense of dread.

In over twenty years of reporting on the suffering church, I have interviewed literally hundreds of Christians who thought they were going to die for their faith. All of them— and *I really do mean all of them*— exhibited two amazing characteristics:

- They experienced unspeakable peace and joy in the midst of the pain as they began to feel death draw near.
- They were as surprised as anyone that they were not afraid of death at the time.

Take Pastor You Yong, kidnapped by Islamic extremists from his church outside Madiun, central Java, in December 2001. Furious that his church was full of Muslim converts, the extremists showered him with questions, trying to provoke him to attack them. They beat him and finally held a long machete to his throat. He assumed he was about to die. But what was going on inside Pastor You? Deeper than all the pain or fear? This is how he put it:

"I was amazed that throughout the ordeal I felt an incredible peace. I was also amazed at the answers I was able to give them. That verse came true: 'When you are brought to trial, do not worry about what to say, for when the time comes, you will be given what to say' (Matt. 10:19). The more they tried to provoke me, the more peace I felt."

Or I remember a pastor from the Soviet Union, who watched his son being beaten to death by the KGB in front of his eyes because he refused to reveal the location of his underground printing press. It was more than a father could stand. He watched the beating get more brutal, hearing his son's bones breaking. He said,

"I thought they would stop, but they went on and on. I felt the blows as if they were on me, and when I at last realized they intended to beat him to death, I made to cry out and say 'stop, spare my son, I will tell you everything.'"

But just before he could open his mouth, his son screamed out, *"Don't tell them anything father. I can see Jesus coming, and He's beautiful."*

Said the father years later, "I recall my amazement at what I was feeling as my son died. I felt so thankful that my son was in the bosom of Jesus. No, it was more powerful than that. I was envious. I still cannot understand it. It was just that Jesus came so close that even the worst tragedy in the world could be felt as a blessing."

And so when death reaches out its icy hand even in more everyday ways: when the plane hits an air pocket, or the results of the suspected cancer scan are due, I remember the experiences of my persecuted friends and I am strengthened to think, "if they have been where I am about to go, and still testify that Jesus is beautiful, and that He gives unaccountable peace, well, it is no tragedy to tread this well-worn path." Their experiences in the face of death help to take the dread of death away.

Of course, I know all this from the Bible, where Paul says that to be with Christ is "far better." And I have read that wonderful passage in Acts 7 when Stephen has the face of an angel when he is stoned to death. But the truth comes with more power when a flesh-and-blood person who has faced death puts their arms around you and says, "You will have peace, and Jesus will be with you in the midst of it all." Death just cannot be that bad if Jesus is that great!

8. They stop me making God “safe!”

“Don’t let them make God safe!”

These words of send-off for me at the Bombay airport were from an Indian Christian evangelist. He had a low opinion of western churches. After visiting them he confided, “They have managed to turn a dangerous God into a safe one...instead of a God that burns with fury against hypocrisy, idolatry and injustice, they have a God that turns a blind eye to all our faults, just keeps on loving us with a disinterested air, and seems not to care whether we stand out for Him or not.”

The persecuted never let us forget that knowing God should bring chaos, not safety, because God’s Gospel is so subversive. Jesus made this clear when He shared, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I came to set sons against their fathers, daughters against their mothers...your worst enemies will be the members of your own family” (Matt. 10:34-36 GNB).

The life of an Indian evangelist proves this point. He used to work as a river guide in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi. It was his job to row tourists around the river, especially at sunrise, so they could take pictures of the morning sun shining on the giant rows of temple steps called *ghats* that hugged the river bank. But he was involved in a far more sinister trade at the same time. His employer insisted he provide sexual services for the tourists who hired the boat, and he soon had no choice but to become a male prostitute.

After a few years of this, he received the Gospel as a result of a chance encounter with a tourist. After becoming a Christian he said, “I felt relief that I did not have to behave that way again. Suddenly a whole new set of choices opened up for me. But I was apprehensive too—the choices that pleased God would not please anyone else.”

His employer had him beaten by thugs. But he refused to return to work as a prostitute. So he was told, “You cannot even make any money as a guide.” He was sacked and immediately had to leave town.

At first he went back to his family, but they were not happy to see him since the income from his earnings that he sent back was no longer available. His mother wailed, “We sold you so you could look after us in our old age, and now you are following a bad God who has made you refuse to provide for us.”

He became convicted that he must return to Varanasi and work to free all the other sex slaves. He began setting up a bank so that low-paid workers could borrow at reasonable rates of interest and not have to go to loan sharks that kept them in financial slavery. He said, “Jesus Christ had given me freedom, and now I had to fight for the freedom of other people just like me. I had to. Jesus makes us pure and sacred, and it is not right that His children should be bought and sold and used like cattle.”

He still fights. He has survived two assassination attempts. His wife had acid thrown over her by thugs employed by the leaders of the prostitution rackets. This man is driven by a love for a God that is determined to set His children free. He added this important qualifier, “People in India are not persecuted because they become a Christian; they are persecuted if they become a Christian that refuses to accept the caste system.” And that brings danger.

“Don’t let them make God safe,” he said, and his words often echo in my mind. I wondered what he meant until I found myself visiting New York City on a Sunday. I heard two preachers on the same Sunday. David Wilkerson said in one of the services, “Churches should be places where God is let loose, but all too often they have become places where God is tamed.”

Then I attended a very posh church who had invited the American sociologist and Christian Tony Campolo to speak. While he was speaking, he used a short swear word. There was a visible bristling in the audience. A woman behind me said audibly, “Disgraceful.” He looked back at them in the shocked silence, and then said, “You know what really sickens me? There are twenty-four poor beggars out on the streets outside your church, and on this very block kids of thirteen and fourteen are being pimped by violent men, but most of you will be more offended by my use of that word than by the sin that surrounds you.”

Truly, God has been made far too safe when the sin of the streets fails to move us, and we can attend churches and never be roused to do something about the challenge of the poor, the needy, and the persecuted. God wants us to stand up and out against sin. He promised us that following Him would get us into a fight.

The fight will come to us if only we realize how subversive His Gospel really is. Let the persecuted help.

9. They help me to remember that deliverance comes through endurance.

Christian testimonies on the whole tend to be dominated by those who experienced wonderful deliverances. Deliverances of healing, from cancer or other life-threatening diseases, or deliverances from debt, or romanceless marriages—there are books galore about those who have had these experiences. Even when it comes to reporting on the persecuted, the same emphasis comes through. We read of pastors who escaped the gunfire of guerillas, of Chinese house church leaders released from the grip of a deadly fever, of border guards with eyes miraculously blinded to the haul of Bibles sitting in plain view on the back seat.

Yet it has to be said that deliverance stories—though they tend to grab the headlines— are not the norm. A dear old Christian in Beijing used to say to me, “Remember, for every deliverance story you hear, there are a hundred endurance stories.” He was right. The story of the persecuted is primarily one of endurance. It has been since New Testament times. Paul warns, “Only those who endure with Christ will reign with Him” (2 Tim. 2:12). And this is surely right—after all, the things we are “delivered” from come back to take us. If Jesus had been “delivered” from the pain of the Cross and miraculously released, we would not be delivered from our sins. So He endured that a deeper, greater deliverance could take place.

I never saw this principle better illustrated than in the story of an old woman doctor in Beijing, known throughout the world as “Auntie Mabel.” A doctor in Beijing, she was well known for her bright Christian witness. She never married in order to look after a sick brother. Her family was wealthy. They lived in a large house in central Beijing.

All that changed abruptly in 1949. Her large house marked her out as one of the landlord class. She was evicted from her house and forced to live in a garden shed, with just a stove, two deck chairs and an old bed. Her Christian convictions meant she was an object of suspicion, and so when the Cultural Revolution broke out, she was stripped of her doctor’s post, and sent to work shoveling sand in a work gang. But the final indignity was when the Red Guards—teenagers who were given power to direct the Revolution—began to visit her, beating her up, parading her in the streets, and forcing her to wear a placard with her crimes written on them.

So thorough were the Red Guards that they erected a large sign outside her house declaring her a pariah because she had distributed “imperialistic literature in praise of the Four Olds,” which being translated means she had given out Bibles in the “mistaken” belief that religion is helpful. For those Red Guards, there was only one “god” allowed, and that was Mao, and only one “bible” allowed, his little Red Book.

Mabel descended into hell. Shunned by neighbors, victimized daily by her work gang, and beaten up regularly by the Red Guards, she came back one night into her little shed and said to God, “I’ve had enough.” She reasoned, “I’m in my sixties now, I’ve lived a good life, and God will not mind me coming to heaven early.” So she took a large chopper, held it over her wrists, and issued one last prayer before bringing it down, “Lord, if this is wrong, help me.”

She never brought the chopper down. She put it away, sat down, burst into tears, and endured another eight years of the beatings, isolation, and victimization. She said, “Somehow God gave me the strength to endure, but I never knew how.”

Later, however, many years later, she knew why.

In the late seventies, after Mao died and Deng returned to power, China began to put the excesses of the Cultural Revolution behind it. The hated Red Guards were disbanded; the little Red Book fell into disuse. But Mabel was not restored to her house. However she began to receive a stream of visitors. To her astonishment, these visitors were all rather high-ranking members of the Communist Party. Even more astonishingly, they asked her for Bibles.

“Why come to me, out of all the people in Beijing; why do you come to the house of a seventy-year-old?” She would ask, and each would answer the same: “Well, during the Cultural Revolution, there was a large sign outside your house full of your crimes. One of them was that you had distributed Bibles. So I’m just here on the chance that you might have some left.”

Amazingly that sign which made her life such a misery became the means of a new ministry. It kept people away from her during the Cultural Revolution, but afterwards, after she had endured, it drew them. Mabel was able to contact a Western mission who smuggled Bibles to her and became the first conduit of Scriptures into China’s capital. She became a vital supplier, and a number of high-ranking members of the Communist Party in China today owe their faith to her endurance.

She reflected, “It’s been nice to know why. It helps my faith. But it was hard. Every day was hard. I can’t say I saw Jesus, or even felt Him close most of the time. I just got the strength to keep going, and that was enough.”

God can deliver us by transforming a situation, but more often He delivers by giving us the strength to endure the situation. That way others are transformed as well as ourselves.

10. They show us that you don't have to be perfect to do the will of God.

While living in Hong Kong, I used to make a point of having dinner with many of the Open Doors supporters worldwide that gave up some holiday time to courier Bibles into China. Often in the course of their travels some of them would meet famous house church leaders like Samuel Lam or Wang Ming Dao.

Usually over dessert they would say—rather hesitantly as if fearful of my reaction: “To be truthful, I was a bit disappointed in meeting (the name),” and they would name the particular famous saint. They would add something like, “I thought these people would be remarkable saints, and of course they were, but they were also quite prejudiced, or rude, or had some other feature that I did not think worthy of a very spiritual leader.”

Many were quite shaken by this discovery. They assumed that the persecuted were “super-saints.” But they are not. It is a very unfortunate trend to idolize the persecuted. We assume that if a Christian survives twenty years in a stinking prison cell they are in a completely different spiritual category from ourselves. They are, of course, different in what they have experienced, but that does not necessarily make them more spiritual. As J.C. Ryle once put it, “Even the best of men are only men at the best.” They often retain the blind spots and prejudices of their culture.

One couple had been visiting the Canton house church leader Samuel Lam. He spent over thirteen years in jail for his faith and built up a house church of 1500 members after his release, refusing to close it down despite numerous threats from the government. But they watched with horror as he taught his listeners in church a series of utterly crackpot theories of the Second Coming, ending up by “proving” triumphantly that Eden was actually in China. Years later, despite the best efforts of Western teachers, Samuel Lam stuck stubbornly to his ludicrous theories. He is a great man...with a great blind spot!

On another occasion I introduced a representative of the Billy Graham Association to Wang Ming Dao, surely one of the most significant figures in the Chinese church's turbulent 20th century. This man embodied the strength of the Christian faith as he emerged from 23 years in solitary confinement still praising God. Millions of house church Christians took their inspiration from his testimony. But Wang Ming Dao had his faults too. He became furious during the interview, refusing to meet Dr. Billy Graham because he was visiting an official church also. Said the representative afterwards, “I didn't expect him to still be so bitter about what had happened forty years ago. That man wants revenge. But does the Scripture not say, *'vengeance is mine' says the Lord?*”

Yes, even Wang Ming Dao had his faults. He was bitter to his dying day. He could not find it in his heart to forgive those who had accused him falsely. And if you look at his sermons you find that he was—in the words of Li Tien En, another house church leader—“a great preacher of the law, but not nearly enough of grace.” In fact this is quite common in Chinese house churches. Sermons often contain lists of tasks that must be performed to earn the favor of God. It comes from life in a typical Chinese family, where children must *earn* the love of their parents, and so this gets mapped onto their relationship with God. It is very hard for them to find their way to an embrace of the unconditional love of God.

On another occasion I was taking a distinguished Bible teacher to meet a revival leader in Lanzhou, Gansu province. The Chinese leader had seen over 50,000 people come to know the Lord through his ministry over a ten-year period, but to our amazement he taught that “you can only come to faith on a Sunday.”

He had been taught Christianity by his beloved grandmother, who believed the Lord would only listen to pleas for repentance on a Sunday. We talked and argued about this, and eventually he threw us out shouting, “You just hate my Granny.” I hear now, two years later, that he has extended the “repentance period” to a Saturday as well. Yet he is still an extremely effective evangelist despite this chronic, man-made obstacle he has erected to the grace of God!

Surely the great point is this: flawed as these men were, they did the will of God mightily. They labored in a country that has seen the number of Christians grow from less than two million in 1978 to over sixty million today—the largest revival in the history of Christendom. God didn’t stop pouring out His Spirit because His saints were imperfect.

If the persecuted teach us anything, it is that God will work through us despite our prejudices, blind spots and eccentricities. If we offer ourselves, we will be used...as we are.

We do not have to be perfect to do God’s will. Otherwise, no one could.

11. They remind me of the need to sing to my spirit.

Once I spent a week in the company of a famous female Chinese evangelist. Many characteristics made her stand out: her courage, her long hours on her knees, and her carefully cultivated simplicity of faith. But at the time, these were not the features that stuck with me and ended up transforming my faith. What actually impressed me about her was the same thing that impressed me about everyone else around her too. They were always singing!

Singing hymns that is!

Three features of the singing were striking.

First, the hymns themselves were not in the least profound. In terms of content, they lacked theological depth and poetic phrasing. Wesley or Newton would not have been proud of these offerings.

Second, they couldn't sing very well. Chinese are not renowned for their harmonic skills in any case. They warbled, croaked, and droned and screeched with a complete disregard for the tune.

Third, they sang primarily to themselves. Oh sure, they sang in groups and to each other, but the most of their singing was done by themselves, to themselves.

But all this did not matter. The songs worked.

As I traveled around, I was reminded of a filmmaker friend of mine who, in his sixties, made a film with a cast of children. He said afterward, "I had completely forgotten how much children laugh. The set was always full of laughter, and I thought, where did we lose the laughter as adults?"

I had a similar experience. Travelling around with these persecuted believers made me realize I had forgotten how much Christians sing praises. For me, the only time I sang was in church or an occasional chorus at a home group. I had never really sung hymns to myself, or seen singing to another as a ministry. I didn't have a terribly good singing voice and felt like I should leave it to those who were good at it. But after hearing everyone in the Persecuted Church of China singing virtually all the time, and seeing the difference it made to them spiritually, I wondered, "Why do I not sing by myself, to my own spirit, or see singing as a ministry of encouragement?"

Here are two examples. This evangelist, whose name was Mrs. Yang, was visited by another full-time preacher who was very downcast. The preacher wanted to buy a tape player, but had no money. Mrs. Yang sat down and just began to sing to him. Her voice was deep and scratchy, the tune barely discernible, the words simple:

*I am a wanderer, my home is in heaven. Life is fleeting.
Our home is in heaven.
In this world we have many trials. And sadness and sickness.
True happiness is not in this world. But in heaven.*

Mrs. Yang sang as if before the Lord Himself. Every word poured out from her core with total conviction. Tears rolled down her cheeks, her hands clenched the air, and she beat time on her hip. Soon the visiting preacher had joined in, and I watched them, roaring out the hymn together, smiles over both their faces.

The preacher left, still with no money for his longed-for tape player, but refreshed and encouraged.

Then again, I watched one morning as Mrs. Yang went out into the hills to pray. I followed her at a discreet distance. First she prayed for twenty minutes then she sang, walking around, for another twenty minutes. For the next hour she read her Bible, making notes, planning the day's sermons. After that she sang again, for another half hour.

I confessed I had been spying on her, and asked, "Why do you sing so much when there is no one to hear?" She said, "My father once told me, one of the sweet things about the Christian life is that you will do things because they are commanded, and then you will spend the rest of your life gaining deeper insight into why God's commands are so good. So singing is a command. In the Psalms we are constantly exhorted to sing praises to our God. But as for why, I confess it is one of those wonderful mysteries my father told me about. You see, while in prison, I could pray and read Scripture, but nothing raised my spirits like singing. Maybe it's because singing somehow concentrates all of the body on the praise of God, but I have found it essential to the maintenance of a positive spirit."

Then she looked embarrassed. I said, "What is it? You were about to say something, but you have gone all reticent." She replied,

"Well, it's just that an old lady told me something that really sums up the main reason I sing. She said, *our spirits are like flowers, and song is the sun. Just as flowers only truly open when the sun shines, so our spirits only blossom when we sing.* I believe that. I don't know how, but it's true. Since my prison cell, I cannot do without song, and I am very frightened that as China gets more open, and the churches get more organized, we are going to leave the singing to the professionals. This would be terrible. The only way you can have a full blossoming spirit is to sing to it."

So when I came back, I picked my seven favorite hymns. Ones like, "We rest on thee, Our Shield and Our Defender," and, "Breath on Me Breath of God." I learned them, and during my quiet times, I sang to my spirit. And I found her words to be true.

A song lifts the spirit like nothing else. And as I read the Bible, I saw how central singing was to the practice of faith. The Israelites sang all the time in the temple; prisoners Paul and Silas sang in the cell; the early house churches sang to each other, and the Scriptures climax in the great throne visions of John in Revelation, and what is going on in that most hallowed place but the singing of a "new song."

Thank you, suffering church, for restoring a lost, but key, component of my quiet time.

12. They help to keep my faith simple.

On his first visit to America, I took a Chinese Bible teacher to a Christian bookstore. I was not prepared for his reaction. I thought he would be overwhelmed by the variety of Bibles, reading aids, books and multi-media material on show. He was, but not in the way I expected. He stopped in the middle of the store, turned to me and said, "It must be very hard to be a Christian here."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Because how are you going to keep your faith simple with all this available?"

We walked around the store as he told me what he meant. He picked five books off the shelf. All had similar titles like "The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life." He leafed through them and said, "Each book seems to say there's a secret to living a happy life in Jesus. But their secrets are all different. They all say there is one secret, but each has a different secret? That's confusing."

"Well, that's just marketing" I explained, a little defensively.

But he went on. "Does that mean I have to buy all five books to really know Christ? That makes me anxious. What other secrets might I not be aware of? I have to buy more books. And soon, I would have more books than I could read, and I would not be happy, but guilty that I had spent money on all these books that I had no time to read."

He put the books down on the floor and said quietly, "In China, I prayed for God to bring me books. He did, but only at the rate of about four per year. So I read those books thoroughly. I copied out passages. I made summaries for teachers. I learned whole chunks by heart. These books really formed me. The point I'm trying to make is that if you have too many books, it's difficult to read one properly. I'm not saying it's impossible, just hard. And this variety actually makes faith more complicated than it really is."

It's true, but so difficult to see when we are constantly seduced by the latest, the best, and the new, even within the Christian culture. Persecution pares life down to its essentials, and keeps the practice of the faith simple. My friend went back to China to keep the basic routines that have given him life. As he put it, "Every day, make sure you pray, witness to others, and above all, praise God."

He taught me a daily habit he learned in prison. "Every morning when you wake up, don't get up; just stay in bed and for ten minutes thank God for anything that comes into your mind. It might be the wallpaper; it might be for friends, it might just be for life. Anything. Once you get going, you discover that the world is full of grace. God's grace. With that attitude you are ready to live the day for God—because you are overwhelmed at how generous God is to you, to everyone."

It's so simple, and yet isn't there something in us that finds the simplest activities so hard to keep up? Maybe that is why we pack our lives with an infinite variety of routines and habits. Anything but just continually doing what is simple.

As a Vietnamese evangelist once said, "Christianity is the only religion that never believes in graduating anyone—we are to stay at the first grade all the time, grateful to Jesus, repentant for our sins, expectant for His coming. Don't graduate, or you'll leave the basics behind."

13. They help me to love mystery.

However we splice it, the Christian life involves living with mystery. Many times the will of God is utterly incomprehensible to us. This is as it should be, since God's ways are so much higher than ours, but it doesn't make it any easier to live with. Living with mystery is hard.

One response I have noticed among Christians all over the world is to try to turn mysteries into problems. This is a false route. Problems are issues *out there* that can be solved. How to put a man on the moon is a problem, not a mystery. A problem can always be solved given enough time, resources, and human ingenuity.

But why, for example, there is so much evil in the world is a mystery, not a problem. Mysteries can never be solved. We can only come to terms with them as imperfectly as we can. We can try to treat evil like a problem, by praying for healing or deliverance, or trying to introduce better education, or electing stronger moral leaders, and so forth, but try as we might, it will not go away. We can never solve the "problem" of evil. It is a mystery. We try to understand it as best we can, but we have to live with it.

Persecuted Christians are no different than Western Christians in many respects. They are Christians full of faults and misunderstandings and sins—just like their free counterparts. And in this matter of dealing with mystery, they exhibit the same foolish characteristics.

Mystery should make us silent, humble, careful. We should not rush to explain what cannot be explained. But I remember on a visit to China meeting a famous house church leader. We were talking about revival. Revival is a mystery. Why does God bring it to some countries and not to others? We don't know. This leader said he knew: "Oh, there is no mystery to revival. Revival is brought about by persecution. You pray for persecution, and you will get revival later on."

But this is quite untrue, and one has to make allowances for persecuted Christians, for though they may know the history of their own churches well, they are often unaware of the history of the church worldwide. It is obvious that God has brought many revivals about without persecution. The Great Awakenings of 18th century in America and Britain, for example, were brought about largely as a result of the preaching of Whitefield and Wesley. It is also obvious that there are places where persecution has not brought revival. One thinks of the whole of North Africa and the Middle East, which provided so many of our early church leaders like Tertullian and Augustine. Now there are only the sandy ruins of churches, and Islam.

Mysteries also should make us honest. We have to admit "we don't know" to God. But all too often we beg for answers we simply could not handle.

But if I look at the *experiences* rather than the *explanations* of the persecuted, I see that at the heart of mystery is not frustration, but joy and grace. The same Chinese leader—so confident he knew the formula to revival—also shared a prison experience: "I had lost my church, my freedom, and I was starting to lose my health, and I cried to God *why are You letting me go through this?*"

He received no formal answer, but said, "I felt a light within me that chased away the darkness, and I received the companionship of Christ. I cannot explain it any more than that, though God knows I have tried. It never comes out right. But the mystery of God's will was the means I rested on the bosom of Christ."

Mysteries appear dark, like black holes on the outside, but as we enter them, we are in for a wonderful discovery. At their center is not darkness, but light. This light is the light of Christ. Paul described himself as a “steward of God’s mysteries” (I Cor. 4:1). This mystery is the mystery of love. Those in love know they cannot explain it fully, but rejoice to be experiencing it. So with Christ. Don’t be afraid of a mystery. It is dark on the outside, but full of light on the inside.

14. They help me to remember that I am always in a fight.

I'm often asked this question, "*In your experience of travelling for many years among the world's persecuted communities, what would you say was the main difference between a persecuted Christian and a Western Christian?*"

My answer has not changed in twenty years: "In the Persecuted Church, Christians realize they are in trouble and go to God about it. In the Western Church, Christians forget they are in trouble, or in a fight, and even if they do remember, never manage to find the time to go to God about it."

Persecuted Christians know they are in a fight. Every day they struggle. Not being conscious of a daily struggle may be sure sign that one is losing the battle of life. The ancient Psalmist looked at the rich elite of Israel and said, "They have no struggles" (Ps. 73:4 NIV). They should have struggles if they wish to please God. But so many Christians in the world today seem surprised at the language of struggle today.

What struggles do the persecuted awaken us to?

There is, first of all, *the struggle we are always in*. Everyone that visits persecuted communities comes away with a renewed appreciation of the spiritual battle we are always engaged in. We have to battle our **reluctant hearts**, which are mired in sin and do not want to face God. Why must we always force ourselves to pray? Our heart is reluctant. We have to battle a **blinding world**, which dazzles and distracts, trying to disorientate us from our true nature and purpose. We also have to battle a **lying devil**, who is forever feeding us lies like "you are no good" and "God doesn't care about you."

The great Victorian preacher, Charles Spurgeon once said, "The devil does not waste his time flogging a dead horse." He meant that if you are not conscious of fighting a daily battle against one's flesh, the world and the devil, then that means only one thing—you have already lost the battle! Time to rejoin it then!

Secondly, there is *the struggle we must awaken to*. Said a persecuted Christian in Palestine, "When you become a real Christian, you get reawakened to the fact that the whole world lies in the hands of the evil one, and this reflects in your own culture." She said, "What your culture worships, you have to struggle against."

In her case, it was a worship of extremist terrorists who risked everything to kill Israelis. In standing out against that, she struggled to communicate to her neighbors who thought she was being "unpatriotic."

We have to face up the same question—what is our culture worshipping? Is it, as Francis Schaeffer once said, "the god of personal peace and affluence," where we don't mind what goes on in the world so long as our space and prosperity is not affected?

For one prayer group in South Central Los Angeles, they became convicted that a whole generation of their youth was worshipping guns, and that mainstream society, through Hollywood filmmaking, was promoting this. They stood out against it, and the house they met in was sprayed by bullets in a drive-by shooting—the very night they were praying!

Another church group in Sheffield, England, became convicted that as the persecuted were helpless to share their struggles with the world, the most “speechless” group in their own society were unborn children. No one can hear their cries from the womb, and yet millions of their voices have been silenced. This struggle is going on all the time in our own societies. It’s the same battle.

Finally, there is *the struggle we must create*. Brother Andrew tells the story of meeting a Pastor Haik of Iran, who said to him in 1993, “Andrew, when they kill me, it will be for speaking, not for being silent.” Haik was killed in 1994. If he had stayed silent about the treatment of his Christian friend, Mehdi Dibaj, Haik would be alive. But he chose to enter, even create, the conflict.

The fact is we can avoid struggle if we want. Each of us has to make a choice to speak up, defy the powers-that-be, and bring a struggle into being. Otherwise it is a rollover victory for the enemy.

Persecuted Christians are always in a fight. They struggle all the time, against their own sins, against idolatries in their own societies, and against the orchestration of the evil one who is out to take our worship away from God. Yet these struggles should mark our own lives and churches as surely as the devil does not live exclusively in China or Columbia. The apostle Paul has to upbraid the Corinthian believers because while they are rich, wise, and honored, he is poor, beaten and persecuted (1 Cor. 4:8-13). Such peace and honor is not meant for this world, but the next.

This world is the place of struggle. What’s your struggle? What’s mine?

The persecuted force us to ask. Everyone ought to have one!

15. They show me that the will of God always gets done because He turns obstacles into instruments!

The Persecuted Church teaches us that everyone is either an *agent* of God's will, or an *instrument* of God's will. Everyone in this world has only two choices: they can choose to do God's will by cooperating with God, or they can choose to defy God and do His will unknowingly.

"Remember, our God is so great even the persecutors serve Him," said a Chinese pastor wryly. He was referring to arch-persecutor of the Chinese church, Mao Tse Tung, who launched the fiercest anti-Christian campaign of the 20th century in the 1960's called "the Cultural Revolution," in which he swept away all churches, burned all Bibles, and imprisoned all the pastors.

Yet all he succeeded in doing was pushing the church deep underground, where it became embedded in the family structure and Chinese culture in a way 300 years of evangelism had failed to accomplish. From this fire emerged the world's largest revival, where the church grew from two million in the late 1970's to over 60 million today.

"We say," smiled the pastor, "that thanks to Mao—who thought he was annihilating the church—we have the greatest revival. He thought he was killing the church, but all the while he was doing pre-evangelism. God had the last laugh. Glory be to God—He always gets His will done."

This truth is starting to show up in India. Since 1997, violence against Christians has increased greatly as a result of the election of Hindu extremists. Yet the effect of the extremism has been to drive thousands of low-caste Hindus into the church. The more Hindu extremists persecute Christians, the more moderate Hindus are drawn into the church. According to a Christian evangelist in Bombay, "God's greatest evangelists in this country are the Hindu extremists. By their violence, bloodlust and bigotry, they disgust the lower castes to the point they say, '*Why should we stay at the bottom of the Hindu pile while these dreadful people oppress us? Let's join the Christians instead.*'"

Dare one suggest that even Osama Bin Laden did the will of God? Many missionaries throughout the Muslim world are reporting that since 9/11 all sorts of new opportunities for conversations with moderate Muslims have arisen. These Muslims have been shaken by the actions of the extremists, and many are considering the Christian faith as a viable alternative for the first time in a lifetime.

It is a glorious truth the persecuted awaken us to...everyone ends up furthering the will of God! Even those who put obstacles in the way of the church serve God, because God just turns the obstacle into an instrument.

This means that we must not despair when we think conditions for the flourishing of our Christian lives or our churches are less than perfect.

A Christian in an Asian democracy said, "I used to think that because we had such corrupt leaders there was no chance of God blessing the church here, but when I look at the persecuted, I see them rejoicing that the will of God is going ahead even though they are in far worse conditions." This Christian now looks to see how God is getting His will done through the very people He thinks are destroying the church.

God probably has a chuckle about all this. I remember three professors at university telling me they had all become Christians as a result of reading Bertrand Russell's book titled "*Why I am Not a Christian*". Russell was a distinguished Cambridge philosopher, and many read the book expecting a powerful case against God to be made. But as one of the professors said, "That Russell could be so convinced by such paltry arguments only served to show me there must be a thing called spiritual blindness. I believed."

Take your worst enemy or the one feature of your life, society or church that causes you most despair, then put your mind into gear and think—how would God work His will through this obstacle?

Are you childless? Maybe God is using that to give you a greater ministry, impossible with the responsibility of family. Are you powerless? Maybe God wants to show His glory and make you marvel. We may not get an answer, but it is a thrill to try, because we know everyone is either a willing agent or an unwitting instrument of the will of God.

He's too great, and He loves the world too much, for it to be any other way! God takes the obstacle, and makes it the instrument!