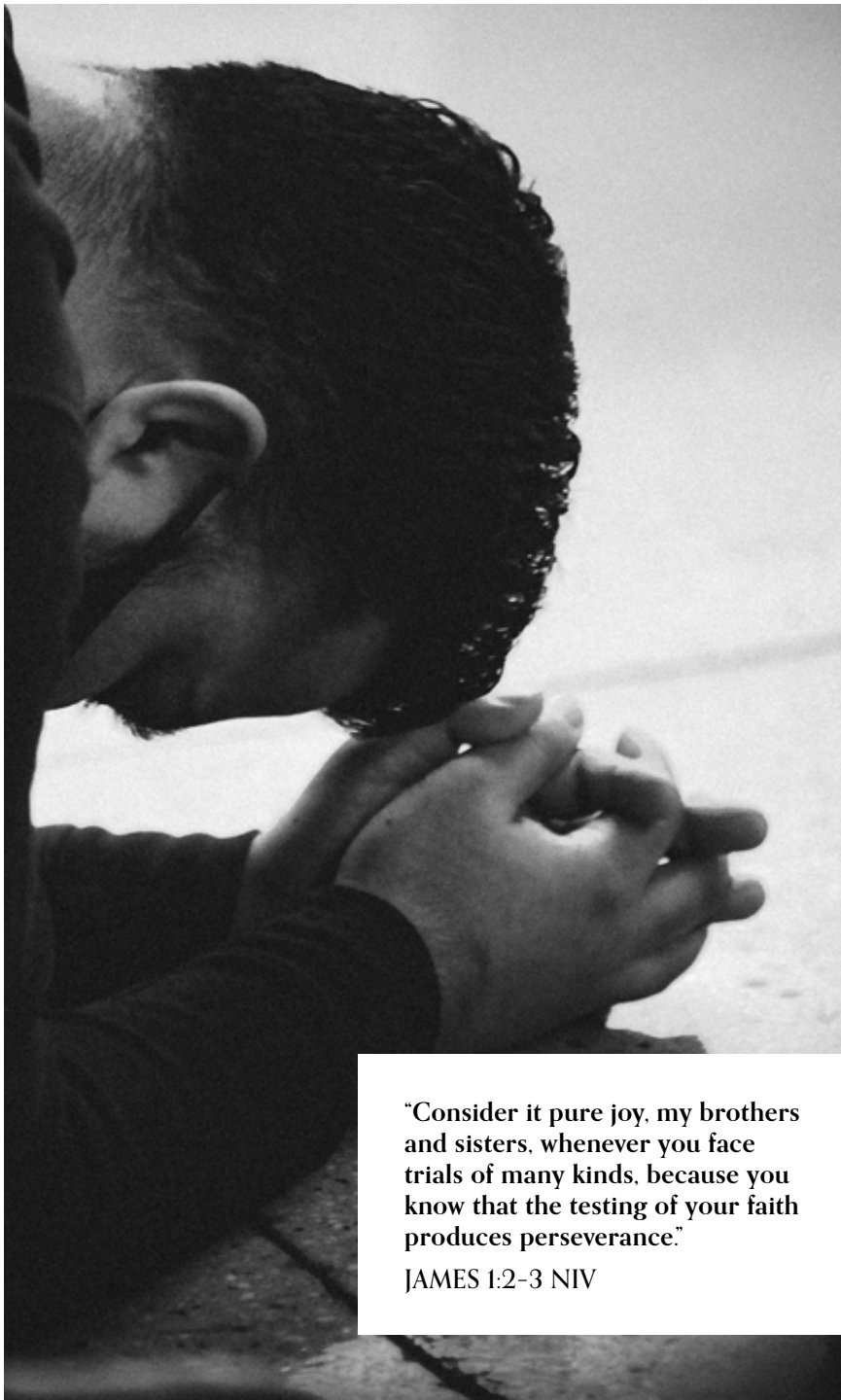




CONSIDER IT JOY?

A 7-DAY DEVOTIONAL
on the Persecuted Church



“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”

JAMES 1:2-3 NIV

Persecution is not new!

In fact, approximately 360 million Christians are suffering persecution today.* Persecution happens in various forms in every nation—from religious intolerance, false accusations, and contempt to illegal arrests, torture, and even death. Many Christians cannot publicly utter the name of Jesus or worship Him freely.

Let’s face it; there is also persecution here at home—though it is usually more subtle. We cannot deny, however, that it is difficult to relate to the magnitude of persecution that the rest of the Body of Christ goes through. At least we have a relatively strong legal framework that protects us.

Our brothers and sisters are suffering, yet their requests are not for relief, but for more Scriptures and prayers to strengthen their resolve. In the midst of their persecution, there is tremendous victory as the Gospel is preached and many come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord. Why is this? What motivates their passion for the Gospel?

The Bible teaches us to “consider it pure joy” when faced with persecution, which seems to be a paradox: where is the joy in pain and suffering? Over the next seven days we will explore the Bible’s perspective on persecution, while we remember those who are being persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ.

To learn more about Bible League, please visit
www.BibleLeague.ca/Ministry/

*Source: Open Doors World Watch List, 2023

Persecution Is a Blessing?

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

MATTHEW 5:10 NIV

This question may be challenging to even consider.

How can it be a blessing when as many as 215 million Christians are suffering persecution today? How can it be a blessing when we are laughed at or shunned for our faith? How is persecution a blessing?

But persecution is a blessing. Persecution helps us determine who we really are. When we face persecution, we are overcomers and we are in good company; Hebrews 11 is full of witnesses to our journey. Persecution validates that we are part of the Kingdom of Heaven, now.

Persecution also shows we are not of this world. We are citizens of a different Kingdom. And there is a reward waiting for us. Our life is short, but Heaven is eternal. This gives us joy. We are doubly blessed!

This is, indeed, what Jesus says. In each of His first seven beatitudes, Jesus uses the word “blessed” only once but when He speaks of persecution, He mentions it twice.

We are doubly blessed if we are persecuted. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness... Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me...” (Matthew 5:10-11 NIV).

He also says the Kingdom of Heaven is ours, and our reward is great. This doesn't mean we should look for persecution, but neither should we hide from it.

Personal Reflection:

*How about you? If persecution were to take everything from you, what would you have left? Would you have the confidence that only comes from Christ? Would you have joy that comes from seeing the future? **Persecution is a blessing!***

Further Scripture Reading:

Matthew 5:10-13, John 16:33, Revelation 2:9

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Please Pray

1. Pray for strength for anyone being persecuted.
2. Pray for opportunities to shine for Christ in the midst of persecution!
3. Thank God for the spread of the gospel in the face of persecution

Contentment during Persecution?

"I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances."

PHILIPPIANS 4:11 NIV

Persecution in its rawest form is harsh, excruciating and disturbing.

Bible League Canada hears many stories of villages being attacked, illegal arrests, imprisonment, beatings, torture and even death. Yet we are asked to pray to fuel their passion and to continue sending the resources they need to meet the demand of a growing Church.

Contentment defined is a state of being. It speaks of an inner state that elevates one from enduring one's present crisis to being satisfied and enjoying peace of mind. The Apostle Paul details a list of many persecutions he experienced, including receiving 39 lashes five times, being beaten with rods three times, being stoned and being shipwrecked three times (2 Corinthians 11:24-25), all for the opportunity to spread the Gospel. He learned that whatever the circumstances, God would give him the strength to endure.

This inner state of contentment is influenced by our Lord Jesus who calls us to take up our cross and follow Him. His love for us compels us to put aside our selfish emotions and thoughts. Being led by the Holy Spirit, we willingly share the good news message with confidence. Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27 NIV). His love for us compels us to put aside our selfish emotions and thoughts.

When we choose to come to terms with our challenges and change our natural responses to reliance on God, only then can we see things from a godly perspective. We can stop striving, and be assured of God's faithfulness and power. Our viewpoint is raised to see the bigger picture.

Personal Reflection:

What challenges are you facing today? Are you experiencing contentment?

Further Scripture Reading:

Philippians 4:4-9, 1 Peter 5:7, 2 Corinthians 6:4-10, 2 Corinthians 12:9

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Please Pray

1. Thank God for His Son Jesus Christ and the great gift of the peace that passes all understanding.
2. Pray for contentment, whatever your circumstances.
3. Pray for an open heart and open mind that will see beyond present difficulties.
4. Pray for those persecuted for their faith to have contentment and peace through the Holy Spirit.

How will they hear about Jesus?

In North East Asia, this country is number one on the World Watch List 2023 as the country where every Christian activity is considered treason by the regime. Possessing a Bible can mean indefinite detention.

"I came because we need Bibles. Do you have 100 copies for me?" A worker had found this woman and had led her to us. It was she who cautiously yet boldly asked us this question. "I know you have previously delivered many Bibles," she said. Watching my face intently she asked, "Do you not still have those kinds of resources?" She continued, "You see, I live deep in the countryside. When people come to deliver Bibles, they will usually travel by train. Because of this, most of the Bibles are delivered to underground churches near the train stations. Therefore, it is easier for these churches to receive support and encouragement from the outside world in this way. It is difficult for people like me, who live far away from any train track or station to even lay eyes on a Bible. Imagine how much more difficult it is to actually get one."

"Without Bibles, how can Christians grow spiritually?"

"There is a church meeting at my house right now. We have one Bible that we share with great care, as it has been handwritten using carbon paper. When we began, we earnestly and diligently took whatever paper we could find, placed them under the few sheets of carbon paper we have, and carefully wrote out the Bible from an old copy. We share the papers with one another."

"We also don't have any hymnals to worship with. What can we do? We take the words of the Bible, make up our own melodies and sing them to our Lord. This is how we have our hymnal. Please understand me when I say that for the believers in my church, even the dream of actually owning a precious Bible is enough to send our hearts racing!" I placed a Bible into that old, weathered hand and watched her walk away. The faces of the nameless believers

surged into my mind's eye. Overwhelmed, I sat, my head between my hands. The hunger, the thirst for a Bible. I felt them as if they were my own. This woman who had traveled so far for a Bible gave me far more than I had given her.

**"I am not ashamed of the gospel,
because it is the power of God for the
salvation of everyone who believes..."**

ROMANS 1:16 NIV



Consider It Joy?

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16–18 NIV

Unlike happiness, joy is not an emotion based on circumstances.

Rather, joy is taking delight in an assured present or future good—such as the promise God has made to His children that they will have life everlasting in His glorious presence. This promise is marvellous! We can be assured, even in the worst situations, that God works all things for good for those that love Him (Romans 8:28) and that our suffering will result in His glory!

Joy is both an outcome of our intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and the source of strength for our continued obedience to Him (John 15:9-12). It is a gift that we are only capable of applying through God’s grace in our lives. The very command to be joyful compels us to focus on Christ because only through the Holy Spirit are we able to obey. As our love for Christ grows deeper, our joy in His person grows, and our ability to obey Him grows.

Joy is a beautiful cycle of encouragement and reward.

Thirty years ago in Ecuador, Pastor Mauricio pleaded with his people to commit to the Lord. For this, he was beaten and stoned out of villages. But Pastor Mauricio kept his heart focused on Jesus Christ and remained joyful in hope and patient in affliction (Romans 12:12). Remembering the promise of God that those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy (Psalms 126:5), he refused to stop sharing the good news. He was assured that from his suffering, there would be a future good, even if he did not see it himself.

Since then, entire communities that Pastor Mauricio visited have turned to the Lord. Many of the persecutors are now leaders of the Church themselves. Though Pastor Mauricio’s ministry was marked by suffering for the cause of Christ, he endured with joy, assured of the final victory. He has been blessed in this life to be rewarded with the ultimate goal of a missionary—to see many people commit to follow Jesus Christ and to be filled, in their turn, with the fullness of the joy of the Lord.

Personal Reflection:

When you are persecuted in the name of Jesus, do you consider it joy? Do you know the assurance of God’s promises? Take time today to ask God to fill your heart with His joy—it will inspire you to grow in love and obedience to Him!

Further Scripture Reading:

Psalms 73:21-26, Luke 10:20-22, Romans 5:1-5, Colossians 1:3-14, 1 Thessalonians 2:17-20, Jude 1:23-25

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Please Pray

1. Thank God for His Holy Spirit that fills your heart with joy.
2. Rejoice in opportunities to speak the name of Jesus with boldness.
3. Pray for an open heart and open mind to see beyond present challenges.
4. Pray for the persecutors – that their eyes may be opened to the truth.

Perseverance during Persecution?

“Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.”

JAMES 1:12 NIV

Few of us in Canada can relate to passages of Scripture that describe suffering because of our faith.

Yet, the reality and possibility of persecution is real in Canada. Too often our concerns revolve around our own expectations of comfort. Our agendas are crowded with matters like adequate parking, padded pews, excellent acoustics and highly visible church signs. However, the number of people filling these facilities continues to dwindle in the face of tolerance, comfort and selffulfillment.

Religious freedom and physical safety have made Canadian Christians lax—often we do not imagine that perseverance has any relevance for us.

But for millions of believers in some parts of Asia, having a church building is impossible or even illegal. They walk for kilometres in the darkness just to crowd into someone’s home or cellar to read the Word of God from a well worn and frequently shared copy of the Bible. They sometimes sit for hours in dim rooms, on mats on the floor, singing softly or even silently to avoid detection. Yet their numbers are growing exponentially!

When asked, they will tearfully relate experiences of interrogation, detention, abuse and even death for simply seeking to follow Jesus Christ and His teachings.

Their animated body language, anguished expressions and probing eyes say that they are reliving their traumatic journey of faith.

Opposition is refining their love for Jesus. Sometimes the glaring scars on their bodies attest to their mistreatment. Sometimes they quote passages of Scripture that flow as though they were coming directly from the mouth of Jesus—Scriptures that gave them encouragement or strength to endure.

In stark contrast to the tears and scars come the smiles when these brothers and sisters describe the joy that Christ gives them as they persevere in trials of faith, and the grace He gives them to forgive their persecutors for Christ’s sake. They also smile and offer thanks to those who are helping to provide them with the precious Living Word of God. These brave and faithful believers have an eternal perspective. Their focus is not on the distracting comforts of this world, but on the glory and rewards of God in Heaven.

Personal Reflection:

How have you persevered when persecuted for your faith? How easy is it for you to smile and lovingly forgive your persecutors? Where is your focus?

Further Scripture Reading:

Isaiah 40:31-32, Philippians 3:1, Revelation 2:3, Revelation 3:8, Revelation 3:11-13, Revelation 22:12-13

Please Pray

1. Ask the Lord to forgive anything taken for granted, such as a church building or great Christian resources.
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal how to pray for persecuted Christians around the world.
3. Pray that brothers and sisters receive strength from the Holy Spirit to stand strong for Christ.

Boldness to Share the Gospel

"If you choose to believe in Jesus, don't step into our house. We don't want anything to do with you or your family," shouted Montu's oldest brother.

A couple of months prior, Montu and his wife Sachi accepted Jesus as their personal Saviour. This came after a great miracle in their lives. Their eyes were opened. Montu is grateful to Jesus for saving his beloved wife during her third pregnancy. Not only was Sachi's health in jeopardy but also the unborn child. As fear began to take root in their heart, their hope began to fade away.

Despite being aware of the problems, challenges and stress that Montu and Sachi were going through, none of their family members came to their aid. In fact, they were even scheming to take advantage of their need.

During their agony, the only person who visited them was Varsh, a local champion. He encouraged them with the Word of God and also prayed for their well-being. He read from Isaiah 41:10 NIV, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Encouraged by these words they started trusting Jesus and praying for a miracle. Despite the doctors' prediction, both Sachi and her new-born son are doing well. The family started attending church to worship God and learned to sing songs of praise. Their faith in Jesus continues to grow. They display comforting verses around their home and have even memorized psalms to strengthen their faith and confidence in God.

Seeing Montu's active involvement in the church, people, including his parents and siblings, started gossiping that he had accepted a bribe for his conversion. They demanded money from him and threatened his wife and children. It is very risky for him and his family to leave the house.

Despite these challenges, they travel 27 kilometres on foot every Sunday to worship with other believers. They pray for those who persecute them and are firm in their commitment to follow Jesus.



"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

ACTS 4:29 NIV



Boast in the Lord?

**“Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.”**

PSALM 115:1 NIV

“I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.”

PSALM 34:2 NIV

People boast about what is important to them, what makes them look good.

But those who love the Lord recognize that we have no strength, nothing to recommend our goodness, no righteousness of which to boast. Whatever our talent, rank or education, we know that we are spiritually bankrupt without God’s grace. Our boast can only be in our Lord. He alone can save us. He can bring out of our suffering testaments to His glory that humble us and make us ever more aware of His love and faithfulness.

A pastor in South East Asia recently shared a story about a village where he had been sharing the Good News. Those listening as he read from the Bible “couldn’t take their eyes off of the Holy Words.”

One of those listeners was a disabled man named Sam*, who quietly asked if he could be baptized in the hot springs nearby. The pastor had a difficult time lowering Sam into the water because of his physical challenges, but Sam praised the Lord as he was lifted, soaking wet, from the pool.

A storm broke out on the return trip and the road washed away. While the rest of those in the minibus were nervous, Sam, the calmest person in the bus, had a sweet smile on his face: the same

smile he had when he was lifted from the waters of the pool back at the hot springs.

As the pastor tells his story, he humbly draws our attention away from his own ministry and the persecution that so many in this region of South East Asia, including him, suffer for following Jesus, and instead boasts of the working of Jesus Christ in Sam’s life.

It is in boasting of the glory of the Lord that joy wells up, joy that overcomes the most difficult circumstances.

Further Scripture Reading:

Jeremiah 9:23-24, 2 Corinthians 1:12-15, 2 Corinthians 10:17

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Please Pray

1. Pray for opportunities to boast about what the Lord has done to demonstrate His awesome power.
2. Pray for those who go out to preach the Gospel message with boldness, despite opposition.
3. Thank God for the working of the Holy Spirit in Sam’s life and heart – and in yours!

* Name changed for security.

At All Times Give Thanks?

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

PHILIPPIANS 4:6 NIV

Where is God? Does God care? Does He understand that I need help? Is God hearing me?

These are just a few questions that run rampant in our minds when feeling anxious about our own trials. It may feel like you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalms 23:4), alone and unsure. Romans 8:28 says that God works all things for the good of those who love Him. Even when we are unsure, our circumstances overwhelm us, or God seems distant, we can have a deep inner assurance that we can trust God because

He cares about us and only has the best for us in mind. Being thankful is a choice. It is determined by our confidence in knowing that God is omniscient, omnipresent and ultimately Sovereign. Because God is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, He knows the outcome of every situation.

Giving thanks requires us to set aside our own limited perspective to hold onto the promises of God. Thankfulness is a mark of the transformation of our attitudes when Jesus saves us. When we are filled with the peace of Christ, thankfulness comes from our new and right understanding of reality: that God is sovereign and has promised to preserve our souls for eternal life with Him.

Whether we are being persecuted or going through a personal crisis, the Bible instructs us to present our prayers and petitions to God with an attitude of thanksgiving. Why?

Because we are promised victory through Christ Jesus who loves us (Romans 8:35-39). There are Christians today in East Asia who endure revilement, unemployment, imprisonment, torture or death because they refuse to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ, yet they continually thank God.

They are overjoyed to be considered worthy to suffer for the sake of the Lord.

Personal Reflection:

What are you facing today that may seem bleak? How has God blessed you during times of crisis? Did you remember to give God thanks? It may seem simple, but take time now to thank God.

Further Scripture Reading:

Habakkuk 3:17-19, 1 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 1 Corinthians 15:57, Ephesians 5:21, 1 Thessalonians 5:17

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Please Pray

1. Pray for a thankful heart.
2. Pray for those whose hearts are hardened by their circumstances, pray that God will soften their hearts.
3. Thank God for your circumstances, whatever they are.

The Bible Is a Precious Gift

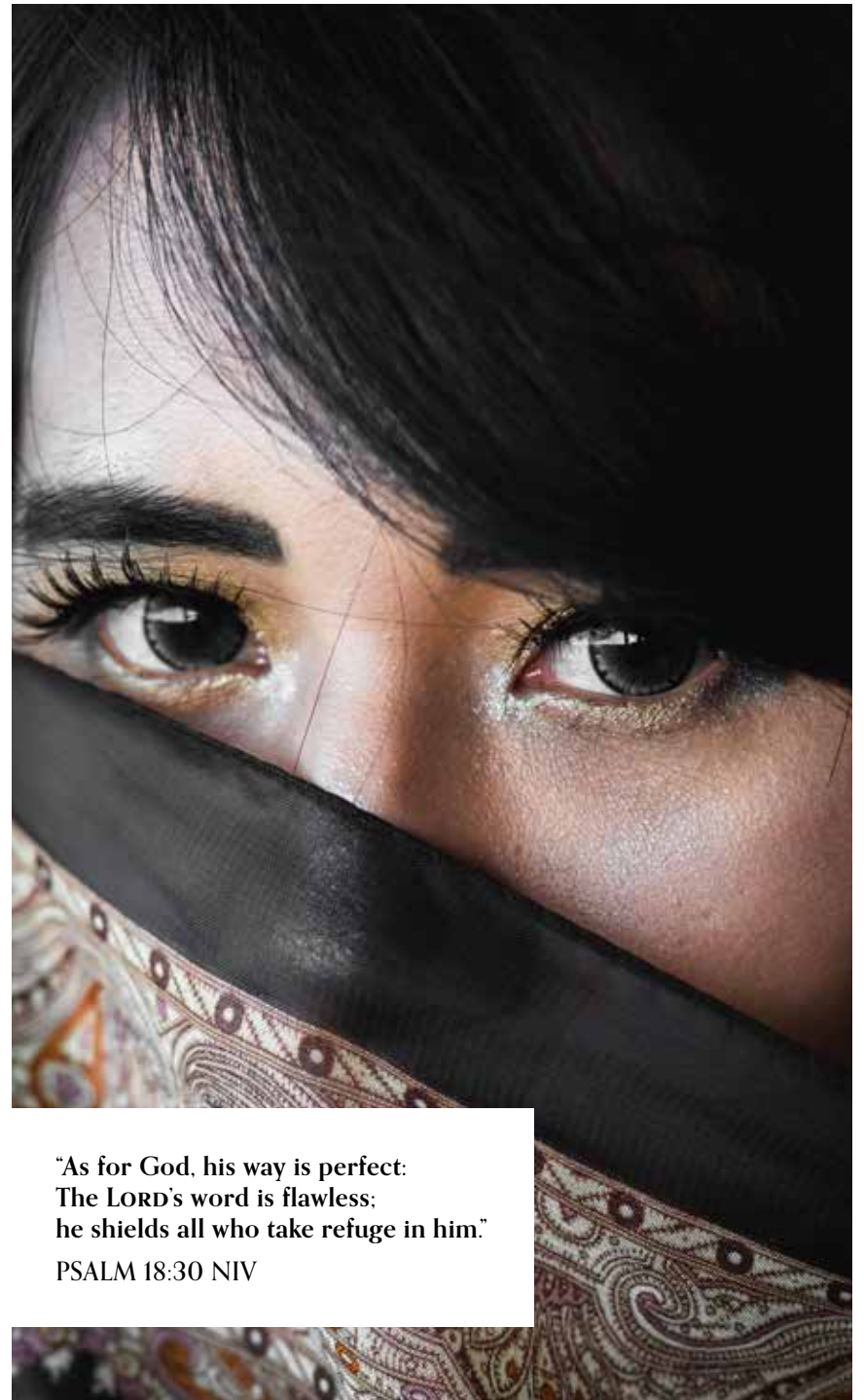
This closed South East Asia nation has the largest population of Muslims in the world. Their constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion; yet Christians and other religious minorities face increasing hostility and persecution from neighbours and local officials.

Local champions like Susila risk grave danger in order to share the Gospel in remote villages. When Susila explained to a friend, Indah, that the blood of Jesus washes away our sins, she cried, repented of her sins, and accepted Him as her Saviour. Susila gave Indah a Bible. Indah read the Bible hungrily, but when her husband saw her reading it, he became enraged and punched her in the face!

In spite of this, Indah continued to read her Bible in the middle of the night. One night, she was filled with so much joy that she began singing in worship. Her husband caught her. He told her that, according to Islamic law, he had the right to kill her. Indah's husband picked up a knife and stabbed her! Indah had told her two teenage sons about Jesus, and they also accepted Christ. When her husband learned of this, he attacked them as well. They all fled to Susila's house, and he and his wife helped them escape.

Susila and his wife also had to leave the village because people knew they were friends with Indah. They did return but continued to face persecution and intimidation tactics. Indah's husband pressured them to find out where his family went and even hired a spy to follow them. Despite these challenges, Susila has persevered in the ministry with the Lord's help, and many former Muslims are coming to Christ.

If you are like me, your heart goes out to those who are suffering so much for the cause of Christ, and you want to help them. New Christians like Indah need the Word of God to encourage and strengthen them during persecution.



**"As for God, his way is perfect:
The LORD's word is flawless;
he shields all who take refuge in him."
PSALM 18:30 NIV**

Triumph and Justice?

“God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

2 THESSALONIANS 1:6–8 NIV

“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 NIV

The Scriptures are filled with promises of a just God who will bring retribution on His enemies and reward the faithful.

For those enduring persecution, it is comforting to remember that because we are in Christ, we already have the victory. To those who overcome, Jesus Christ has promised to give the right to sit with Him on His throne, just as He overcame and sat with His Father on His throne (Revelation 3:21). We are heirs with Christ and we are Christ's inheritance (Ephesians 1:3-1). Imagine that—we are Jesus Christ's reward! And nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from Him (Romans 8:38-39).

God says, “it is mine to repay” (Romans 12:19), commanding us instead to love and pray for our enemies. We hope that God will have mercy and open people's hearts to the Gospel so they might be saved. But for those who continue to do evil, each kindness we perform “heaps burning coals” on their heads to be repaid with God's coming wrath (Romans 12:20). While we love people, we also share God's hatred of sin and evil.

We anticipate the day when sin will be punished. Even as children we want things to be fair. When we suffer for Christ's sake, we can be assured that justice is in the hands of a righteous God. No act, good or evil, will go unseen or unanswered.

But victory also occurs in the midst of persecution. We do not have to wait for Judgment Day before we can experience the triumph of Jesus Christ. Persecution forces us to rely on Christ, gives us the opportunity to be bold for Christ, and draws us closer to Him. As Paul said, “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

Most of all, we must remember that persecution is in God's sovereign hands. His purposes are for our good. He uses persecution like a refiner's fire to validate our faith. He shapes us for even greater rewards so that His glory is magnified. One day we will be handed our reward—a crown, jewels, gold, wood, or straw—and we will have the ultimate honour of casting our prize at the feet of Jesus Christ (Revelation 4:10), for all we endure is for the honour of Jesus Christ, our just and victorious King! “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done” (Revelation 22:12).

Further Scripture Reading:

Psalm 112:8, 1 Corinthians 15:57-58, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10, Revelation 2:26-29, Revelation 3:5-6

Please Pray

1. Pray for a forgiving heart.
2. Pray for your enemies, one by one wholeheartedly. Pray for their release, and yours.
3. Commit your life to God for His good purposes no matter what the circumstances might be.
4. Thank God for the victory and triumph you can claim because of Jesus Christ!

Struck Down but Not Destroyed

Anjas is working to start a new church in India. Over the past five years Anjas has reached 15 villages in central India sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the Children's Bible clubs, many of the kids and parents have accepted Jesus, converting from Hinduism to Christianity.

One night, Anjas was on his way to finalize some details for a prayer event. He expected a large crowd, and he was excited to see how God would heal and touch people!

Driving through the marketplace, he had to slow his motorbike. Five men blocked his path. Suddenly, one of the men was pushed into Anjas's motorbike. Anjas stopped. Immediately, the five men surrounded him.

And they were not alone. Soon, an angry mob of fifty gathered around Anjas. The mob began shouting. "Why are you converting Hindus to Christianity?" they demanded. "Why have you brought these programs and ministries to our village?"

The crowd dragged Anjas off of his bike. Lying on the ground, Anjas tried to shield himself with his arms. The men kicked him... and punched him...over and over and over.

Anjas lost consciousness. Stealing Anjas's motorbike, the crowd dispersed.

Local Christians rushed Anjas to the hospital.

The next thing Anjas knew, he was staring up into white lights in the Intensive Care Unit. The doctors told him to stay in bed: "You are suffering from shock, and you are badly wounded. It will take time to heal."

Anjas has since been released from the hospital, but he is discouraged by this violent attack on him.

The night before Anjas was attacked, he had led a huge prayer meeting. God touched and healed many, and 102 people were baptized.

Pray that the Lord will provide Anjas with tremendous strength and courage to continue to carry out his work among the children and villagers.



"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body."

2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-10 NIV





**"The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you; the LORD turn
his face toward you and give you peace."**

NUMBERS 6:24-26 NIV

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Thank you for participating in this devotional. Your prayers and gifts answer the request from our brothers and sisters living in persecuted countries around the world.



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