

# Better (Hebrews)

Sermon Questions | 11.02.14

## Opener

Describe for us the worst place you ever went to for vacation and why it was so bad.

Today is global prayer day for the persecuted church. You'll find a summary of some of the leading areas of persecution for Christians today below. Take the time to share some of these stories with your group and discuss how this affects them.

Persecution: Data from Open Doors Watch List

### 1. North Korea:

Leader: Kim Jong-Un

Population: 24 million (300,000 Christians)

North Korea ranks first on the 2014 World Watch List for the 12th consecutive year. It is safe to say that nothing has improved for Christians since Kim Jong Un took over power. Pressure remains extremely high and there is virtually no way to escape for those who don't live near the Chinese border.

The God-like worship of the rulers leaves no room for any other religion. Any reverence not concentrated on the Kim dynasty will be seen as dangerous and state-threatening.

Not only will the believers themselves be punished if they are discovered, but likely also their families. Immediate family members, even if they aren't Christians themselves, will serve a sentence in a re-education camp. Christians are sent to political labor camps, from which there is no release possible.

According to recent reports about the labor camp systems, it is estimated that political prison camps house approximately 150,000 to 200,000 inmates, not including all those in the other types of prisons in the country. One report suggests the number of political prisoners dropped to between 80,000 and 120,000 people, due to the high death rate. In prison No. 15 alone (Yodok Prison Camp), experts

estimate there could be up to 6,000 Christians incarcerated. It is estimated that 50-70,000 Christians suffer daily in North Korea's prison camps

## 2. Somalia:

Leader: President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud

Population: 10.3 million (A few hundred Christians)

Behind North Korea, Somalia ranks as the second most difficult place to be a Christian in the world. The main types of Christians in Somalia are Christian converts from a Muslim Background, also known as Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) and there is a tiny population of expatriate aid workers. The position of Christians in Somalia has deteriorated and most face extreme persecution.

The majority of people within Somalia are Muslim, and no one is expected to be a Christian. Moreover, Islamic religious leaders publicly maintain that there is no room for Christianity, Christians and churches in Somalia.

Additionally, the violent, militant Islamist terrorist group, al-Shabaab, subscribes to the Wahhabist doctrine and advocates for Sharia law as basis to regulate all aspects of life in Somalia (i.e. legal, political, social and economic). Al-Shabaab's implementation of its Wahhabist worldview is so extreme that, according to an Open Doors field researcher, even Sufi-Muslims moved underground to avoid persecution by al-Shabaab.

In the country's very recent history, MBBs - or those accused of being MBBs - have often been killed on the spot when discovered. Over the reporting period, the situation appears to have worsened. The government intensified investigations into people who are Christians and in a position of leadership. Subsequently, there have been attempts to arrest Christians. Surveillance of (alleged) 'tentmakers' has increased as well. An Open Doors field researcher indicated that ordinary citizens - in collaboration with al-Shabaab - have been involved in the killing of Christians. The researcher stated that: "Believers have been betrayed into the hands of al-Shabaab by their neighbors..."

## 3. Syria

Leader: President Bashar al-Assad

Population: 21.8million (1.3millionChristians)

Open Doors Ministry has received reports of many Christians being abducted, physically harmed and killed. Within the context of the civil war, many churches have been damaged or destroyed, in many cases deliberately. On October 21st, Sadad, a

predominantly Christian town, was invaded by Islamist militias, before being re-taken by the Syrian army on October 31.

Stories were told of 45 civilians being murdered and dumped into mass graves. "What happened in Sadad is the most serious and biggest massacre of Christians in Syria in the past two years and a half," says to Archbishop Alnemeh, Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Homs and Hama. "It is the largest massacre of Christians in Syria.

At the end of October, over in Raqqah, there were reports of Bibles and other Christian literature being burned in front of a church and a cross ripped off the top of the Armenian Church in Tal Abyad and set alight by militants from ISIS.

#### **4. Iraq**

Leader: Prime Minister Nouri-al-Maliki

Population: 35.9 million (330,000 Christians)

Islamic terrorist groups are increasing, one of their aims is to rid the country of Christians. Local sources say every two or three days a Christian is killed, kidnapped or abused.

#### **5. Maldives**

President: Abdulla Yameen

Population: 333,000 (Several Christians)

To be Maldivian is equated with being Muslim, so officially there are no Maldivian Christians, only ex-pat Christians. The government sees itself as the protector of Islam, and the law prohibits conversion to other faiths; those who do so face losing citizenship. There is extensive social control over all individuals to correct any deviation from the path of Islam. This pressure is mirrored within families and communities. Consequently, there are no church gatherings or buildings...

#### **6. Sudan**

Leader: President Omar al-Bashir

Population: 45.7 M (Christians unknown)

Sudan is a poverty-stricken Muslim country that lost many of its Christians to South Sudan when it became independent in 2011. The regime's leaders are mainly radical Islamist, and the ruling National Congress Party a means to further an Islamic agenda. Incidents against Christians include faith-related killings, damaging Christian

properties and forced marriage as well as arrests, deportations and raids on church offices. Sudanese Muslim-background believers suffer particularly: one believer's family burned his house down when they discovered he had turned to Christ.

## 7. Eritrea

Leader: President Isaias Afewerki

Population: 5.9 M (2.7 M. Christians)

Those in the Coptic Church enjoy relative freedom, but Christians of other denominations suffer house raids, arrests and systematic torture. Gabriella is an influential Christian in the underground church who was interrogated, tortured and kept in solitary confinement – but she never denied Christ. She describes her time in prison as 'a honeymoon with Jesus'.

### Read

Hebrews 2:5-9

Hebrews 1:13 and Psalm 113

2 Peter 3:8-13

### Engaging with God in a Group

Ask someone to read Hebrews 2:5-9 out loud for the group.

When you hear stories of Christian being persecuted, does a nagging question pop into your mind? If Jesus is in charge, why does he let this happen? Why doesn't he just zap Bashar al-Assad?"

See Hebrews 1:13 (quoting Psalm 113).

- Why aren't Jesus' enemies his footstool now?
- Who are Jesus's enemies?
- How does it make you feel to know that one day every one of Jesus's enemies will be under his feet?
- What is the reason for Jesus waiting to make his enemies his footstool (See Hebrews 2:9)?

See how Peter addresses this same issue in II Peter 3:8-13. What were his conclusions? What does this discussion make you think about God's patience with humanity?

Discuss the following thoughts. Two things we need to get from the Hebrews 2:5-9 text:

- Make sure we share the gospel!
- Pray for our suffering siblings around the world.

Finally, in western Christianity our perspective is skewed; we want to feel better at all costs. Feeling better has become more important than walking with Jesus. Our persecuted siblings have a different attitude...

- We pray - "Jesus take this burden off my back."
- They pray - "Jesus strengthen my back for this burden."

## **Engaging with God Alone**

Let's also pray for hope to rise up in them!

## **Closing thoughts and prayer**

Lord, give us your prompting to share the gospel with a heart for Jesus and others. We pray for our suffering siblings around the world. Strengthen their backs for this burden and ours as well when we face persecution and suffering.