

Are you prepared for persecution?

The Bible warns us: "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."
2 Timothy 3:12

Perhaps you will never suffer the vicious and violent persecution which the Christians in Sudan and Nagorno Karabagh are suffering at this time - but if we remain faithful to the Lord then there will be times when we will be misunderstood, slandered, discriminated against, threatened and abused.

Jesus said "If they persecute me, they will persecute you also." John 15:18

When Christ warned his disciples of the coming persecution (Matthew 16:21-26; 26:31-35) they responded with disbelief. Because they did not believe Christ's warning they didn't watch and pray. And so they denied the Lord and ran away (Matthew 26:40-46, 56, 69-75).

Paul strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the Faith by teaching: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" Acts 14:22.

Jesus taught that many believers would forsake Him (Matt 24:9-10) when trouble or persecution comes - because of a superficial commitment. Those with no roots in God's Word would quickly fall away (Matt 13:21).

In response to the clear warnings of these Scriptures and in the light of the present uncertainties it would be wise for every Christian to study what God's Word has to say about persecution. And build into our lives those principles and realities that enabled others to endure hardships for

the cause of Christ.

This article is based upon a series of messages presented by Rev. Bill Bathman at a Frontline Fellowship Seminar "The Persecuted Church and You".

Listening to the Persecuted

"The Spirit then lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit, with the strong hand of the Lord upon me. I came to the exiles who lived at Tel Aviv near the Kabar River. And there, where they were living, I sat among them for seven days - overwhelmed." Ezekiel 3:14,15

The first thing to do is to go where they are, to be with them where they live and to listen. Ezekiel was overwhelmed by what the exiles were suffering and so will we be - as we learn to listen. To be sensitive to the Spirit of God and to go where He wants us to go and to learn what He wants to teach us.

My first encounter with persecution was in Columbia in the 1950's, where Catholics were gouging out the eyes of some Protestants for reading the Bible. Then in 1957, I witnessed the Catholic persecution in Spain. A mob stabbed a Protestant believer in the streets, in broad daylight. A Roman Catholic priest stood over him, sucking on a cigarette and not raising a finger to help him while he bled to death.

There was a tremendous shortage of Bibles in Spain and an overwhelming response to our radio broadcasts and literature ministry. When we listened to the believers in Spain they asked for Bibles and requested more Bible teaching over the radio.

In October 1961, I was sent by Trans World Radio to communist Yugoslavia to collect tapes from believers who had recorded programmes for broadcasting in the local languages. As I sought the Lord before this assignment, the Lord impressed upon me Revelation 3:8: "Behold I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it."

As I drove into Yugoslavia, the Lord guided me as to what to say and what not to say, to be polite and to answer only what was asked of me and no more. Not to ask directions but only to use maps and personal discovery. Not to park outside - or near - the home of our contacts. To be discreet and cautious.

As my first contact in Yugoslavia, Dr Josif Horak welcomed me enthusiastically. His words came like a commission from the Lord: "You must come back! Even if the door is closed - try it, to see if it's locked."

We learnt to trust God at every step. We never took any trip for granted. Every border crossing was a miracle. We would pray: "Lord we didn't ask for this assignment but if You want us to deliver these Bibles to Your people behind the Iron Curtain, please work a miracle." And during the 33 years I've been ministering behind the Iron Curtain we've delivered tens of thousands of Bibles safely.

Whenever we asked what we could do, the believers replied, "We need Bibles." In the 1960's over 75% of the Baptist pastors in Romania did not even possess their own copy of the Bible.

Often we found congregations without even a single Bible. Sometimes the only Bibles available were handwritten copies. Christians would share single pages of the Bible, swapping their pages for others at church. Many times I was told: "We can never receive enough Bibles." The need was so great.

Often we were asked: "Do the Christians in the West pray for us?" With a heavy heart I had to admit, "Most don't even know that you exist."

One pastor whom I often visited in 1962 was Aran Jhlovich in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. His 36-year-old son, who was also a pastor, had been arrested by Tito's police a short while before. In front of his father they had forced him to his knees and shot him in the back of the head. Aran saw his son's forehead explode and fall to the ground.

The communists threatened Pastor Jhlovich: "Everything you do for Jesus is against the state."

"Then I will go on being against the state," Aran replied. "Until you do to me what you did to my son."

This pastor continued to translate Christian books into Serbo-Croatian. And we continued to smuggle out these manuscripts for publication. Pastor Jhlovich continued to faithfully serve the Lord until his death.

In 1967 I met the famous hymnist and pianist, Nicolae Moldoveanu, in Sibiu, Romania. His hands were disfigured because the communists had broken every bone in every finger of each hand because he loved to play the piano and organ to the glory of the Lord. He had spent years in prison for his music ministry. But while in prison, without musical instruments and without pen and paper, he had composed and committed to memory an average of a hymn a day. Today hundreds of his hymns are sung in almost every church in Romania.

I also learnt that persecution is not only murder, torture or imprisonment but discrimination in education and employment. Higher education, and therefore better job prospects, was consistently denied to Christians and to the children of Christians. Immense pressure was placed on children to join the communist party youth and become atheists. As Joseph Tson of Romania explained, "If you obeyed, you got privileges. If you disobeyed, you were punished."

Dr Nick Gheorghita, a distinguished endocrinologist in Romania, was confronted by the local authorities: "You must choose between your God and your government," they threatened him. "This is the post-Christian era. Your career is at stake...You have 30 days to choose!"

"Gentlemen," Dr Nick replied, "I do not need 30 days. Nor do I need 30 minutes. Nor even 30 seconds. I can tell you this moment: I choose my God."

The communist officials were furious and threatened to "terminate" him. As he stood firm in his faith, they changed tactics and refused Dr Nick's daughter any further education - even though she was an honours student. As Romania was a socialist country, there was no alternative

source of education, and she later fled the country to study in the USA.

In 1975, when Joseph Tson was the Baptist pastor in Ploiesti, Romania, the communists threatened him: "Don't you know that we have the power to kill you?"

"Yes, you have the power of force," replied Joseph, "But we Christians have a weapon - sacrifice. And our weapon is superior to yours. We are God's army of lambs."

In the Hindu country of Nepal, the king was offended by conversions to Christ and so the Hindu officials regularly imprisoned and beat Christians. In 1987, I attended a conference for (foreign) Christian leaders in Katmandu, Nepal. When the International Hotel refused to accommodate such a gathering, a local pastor hosted the conference. Two hours after the delegates left, the pastor was arrested, and jailed.

Only consistent international prayer, publicity and pressure brought about his release less than a month later, but he was then exiled from the country of his birth. When I spoke to him, this pastor replied: "It is our privilege to suffer for Jesus."

Learning from the Persecuted

"I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You." Psalm 119:11

The persecuted Christians place much importance on heart knowledge of the Scripture. Our dear friend Sabina Wurmbbrand told us that before she was arrested in Romania she was very poor. But while in prison she became very rich.

This was because as a pastor's wife she was not well off with this world's goods. However, she was rich in the only currency that mattered in prison - the Word of God. And because she had stored up such spiritual treasures through Bible memorisation, Sabina Wurmbbrand was able to make fellow prisoners rich in the Word of God.

The persecuted Churches of Eastern Europe placed a high priority on Scripture memorisation. Many congregations had corporately memorised the entire Bible. So at any given service the pastor could call upon some member to recite from memory any chapters of those books of the Bible which he had been assigned to memorise.

Some Christians had wrapped a spare Bible in a plastic bag and buried it in anticipation of later confiscation. Often I came across families engaged in writing out the whole Bible by hand. When Bibles were very scarce precious copies were rotated amongst members of the congregation. Many families then used their night to copy as much of the Bible as possible - by hand. Most Christians had memorised a wide selection of hymns and chapters of the Bible.

Many thousands of pastors were removed from their positions and forbidden to preach by the communist authorities. Some were reappointed by their congregation as the caretaker or as a deacon and regularly asked to "share" in the services. So instead of preaching from behind the pulpit they "shared" from the Word of God and prayed from in front of the pulpit.

When the communist authorities closed down, or heavily restricted Bible colleges and theological seminaries, some churches began an informal underground training course. In Romania one thousand Baptist congregations were only allowed to train 5 theological students every 4 years.

So 2nd Baptist Church in Oradea started The School of the Prophets which trained ministers in intensive lectures after working hours in the evening. The School of the Prophets graduated over 50 ministers/evangelists a year.

When a church in Talin, Estonia was closed down, the people met in the street outside the church and held a protest service in the road. In the chaos caused by the blocked traffic the authorities reopened the church building.

When the Estonian church was forbidden to have more than one service on Sunday they responded by holding an 11 hour church service - from 9:30am to 8:30pm! And the youth stayed on for 1½ hours longer singing choruses. Others had joined the service an hour earlier

for prayer.

When the Marxists wouldn't allow a religious youth camp or rally, the church organised a "Peace Conference". I preached at this youth weekend on "Jesus the Prince of Peace", "My peace I give unto you" and other appropriate peace verses.

When they were thrown in jail, Christians sang praises to God and evangelised the other prisoners and many more were converted. When the secret police attempted to infiltrate spies into the congregation, the Christians would use the system for evangelistic purposes. Knowing that these spies would have to present a full report of what was said they were careful to clearly present the way of salvation.

When some false believer attempted to ingratiate himself with Sabina Wurmbrand she asked him: "before you continue, will you please lead us in prayer." After his awkward silence and clumsy attempt, Sabina chided him: "Now, don't you feel ashamed of yourself? Let me tell you how you can become a real Christian."

The persecutors know that a chain is only as good as its weakest link. Those Christians who were weak were the ones on whom the marxists would prey, pressurising them for information, persuading them to compromise. Knowing this danger the Christians would feed potential informers harmless or misleading information. Occasionally they would test security leaks with "marked" information which if acted upon would conclusively reveal who the "leak" was. They would continue to pray for the traitors - overcoming their betrayal with Christian love.

On one of my visits to Oradea, Romania, I met Rev Alex Popovici. "Pache" (Peace), we exchanged Christian greetings in the dark passageway outside his apartment. "You are an angel come from God", he said. Alex was about to be exiled and he needed me to smuggle out his manuscript on the history of the Baptists in Romania.

He then told me that he had just baptised two people in his bath tub - wearing a mask. Alex chose to baptise whilst wearing a mask so that those he baptised could in all honesty tell any interrogator that they had not seen who baptised them.

As our Lord Jesus warned us: "be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves." Matthew 10:16

We also learnt that the persecuted are not all in prison. The psychological and emotional suffering can be worse than physical torture. Hebrews 11:35-37 describes some of the suffering of God's people: torture, imprisonment, flogging, execution, destitution, mistreatment, and cruel mockings. Cruel mocking? Yes, lies about loved ones were told to devastate prisoners. By hurting their families the marxists subjected the prisoners to the most severe torment possible.

On one pastor's uniform was written a "0". "You are a zero" they told him. "You are a nobody, a nothing." "Yes," he replied "I am a zero but Jesus Christ stands with me and a "1" in front of a "0" equals a "10".

Serving the Persecuted

"Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."

Hebrews 13:3

For the last 33 years I have had the privilege of serving the persecuted Christians in Eastern Europe. This ministry involved smuggling in Bibles and other Christian literature - and it involved smuggling out written manuscripts for publication and taped messages for radio broadcasts.

Along with the Bibles we delivered grocery items and financial gifts to the wives of imprisoned pastors, destitute families and other needy believers. We also delivered medicines, spare parts for vehicles and equipment and any other practical items which could help their families and ministries.

Tape recorders enabled pastors to multiply their messages and helped launch preaching points in many villages. Vehicles enabled soul winning pastors to care for more churches and hold more services.

My first contacts in Eastern Europe came from refugees who had fled communist rule. We learnt not to endanger our contacts by asking directions to reach their addresses. The danger from spies and informers could not be overestimated.

Once having found the apartment block we would keep driving and park about a kilometre away. For a Western car to park nearby a residential area would have been too conspicuous and would have invited suspicion from the communist police or "street committee".

Wearing similar clothing to the local people, or an East European type of overcoat we could merge with the crowds. Ensuring that we were not being followed we would carefully walk back to the contact address. Upon entering the apartment building we would climb the stairs, checking the doors on each landing for the name of the family we were looking for. When we found it we counted the steps down to the street level.

Later that night we would return and walk quietly up the stairs in the dark. We knew exactly how many steps because we'd counted them in the daylight. Residents would push a button to activate the light in the stairwell. The switch always made a loud sound as it started a timing mechanism that would turn off the light in about a minute. This would be loud enough to alert the local informer to observe who was visiting and who was being visited.

Those who want to serve the persecuted need to be considerate - to learn to be circumspect. We don't want to make their lives difficult.

One way in which we have been able to help the persecuted is through pressure. By sending letters and telegrams of support to those suffering harassment or persecution we were able to let the persecutors know that the pastor, family or congregation they were targeting was well known, loved, and supported. And that we were watching. Publicity provided protection for the persecuted.

One also needs wisdom and discernment to serve the suffering. One year, eight mission teams were intercepted at the border by communist secret police. Their vehicles and Bibles were confiscated. When the various missions got together to find the security leak it was found that a

spy in the British and Foreign Bible Society in London had sabotaged the smuggling trips.

It became apparent that when purchasing quantities of Bibles in Eastern European languages one should use different vehicles and personnel to those who would undertake the border crossings. Strict security needed to be maintained concerning dates, routes and contacts.

On another occasion, the marxists achieved a double propaganda victory by announcing that 100 000 Bibles would be printed in Romania. However what was not published was the fact that the Bibles printed had to be in the most archaic translation - virtually incomprehensible to young Romanians. So the news headlines in the West seemed to prove that Bibles were no longer banned in Romania. And the Bible translation seemed to prove to Romanians that Christianity was an obsolete religion - only for old people.

In addition the conditions imposed on the Bible Society by the Romanian government included the following: Only 10 000 copies could be printed each year. Only pre-paid orders from registered members of Orthodox (WCC affiliated) churches could obtain these Bibles. The paper and ink had to be imported with extravagant import duties. The communist printers were paid by the Bible Society to print the Bibles. And the Bibles were still sold by the marxists - who pocketed the profit themselves!

Most church goers in the West never learnt the details of this deal and only noticed the misleading headlines. The prevalent false impressions served the purposes of the persecutors and caused a major drop in support for those missions who were ministering behind the Iron Curtain.

When we began our mission to serve the persecuted churches behind the Iron Curtain most of the pastors did not even have their own copy of the Bible. On each trip we carried 75 to 250 Bibles - depending on available space and other considerations. In a short time every pastor had his own copy of the Word of God. We then began to concentrate on getting a Bible to every Christian family.

Our loads multiplied and the risk factor increased. The border guards began to ask: "Do you have any guns? Do you have any drugs? Do you have any pornographic materials? Do you have any Bibles?" Often they dismantled vehicles and searched through every item of luggage

for "contraband". We had many close calls and incidents of answered prayer. By the grace of God we never lost a Bible. They were all safely delivered.

"They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the Word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death." Revelation 12:11

Over the last 12 years of ministering in Mozambique, Angola, Romania, Albania and other countries where severe persecution has raged has taught me that it is possible not only to survive persecution - but to thrive in spite of it. The more we build these principles into our lives, the better prepared we will be to triumph amidst tribulation.

1. The Sovereignty of God (Psalm 2)

God is all knowing, all powerful and everywhere present. He is sovereign over the affairs of men and His Will will ultimately be done. Those who fight against God will lose. We may not know the future but we do know Him who holds the future.

"If we share Christ's suffering we will also share His glory." Romans 8:17

2. Bible memorisation (Psalm 1:2-3)

Our most precious possession is the Word of God. Therefore we are urged to "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly" Col 3:16. Persecutors may be able to confiscate your Bible but they cannot take away the Word of God that is stored up in your heart and mind. Every Christian who has ever suffered imprisonment, especially in solitary confinement, will agree that the Lord used their Scripture memory verses as an inexhaustible source of refreshment, encouragement and strength.

"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ." Romans 10:17

3. Prayer is your lifeline (2 Thess 3:1-5)

In the midst of suffering, only the reality of God in our lives will enable us to stand firm. Our personal relationship with the Lord is the root source of our strength and courage. Therefore we need to cultivate our devotional life.

"After they prayed...they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God boldly."
Acts 4:31

4. Fear God and not man (Deut 10:12-13)

The fear of man is a trap. People-pleasers make traitors (John 5:44). To fear the Lord frees us from the fear of man. There is only one God - but there are many men. It is better to fear the one true God than to be enslaved to the fear of men (Gal 1:10).

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him." Luke 12:4,5

5. Stand firm. Do not compromise on principle (Phil 1:27-29)

Joseph, David and Daniel risked everything by refusing to compromise their principles and their obedience to the plans and purposes of God. As a result they suffered persecution. Yet their faith remained steadfast. They persevered and God raised them up to rule over the land. (Gen 39-41; 1 Sam 18 - 2 Sam 2; Dan 6). We too need to be steadfast and remain faithful to the Word of God.

"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and

there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." Ephesians 4:14

6. Exercise your faith (Heb 11:1,32-39)

By faith God's people can turn stumbling blocks into stepping stones, crisis situations into opportunities, battles into victories (Rom 8:28). We are "more than conquerors" Romans 8:37 and "overcomers" 1 John 5:4 through Christ. Yet, just as we need to exercise our bodies to maintain and increase our physical strength, so too we need to test our faith - putting it under stress and strain in training for godliness. You don't start studying the day the examination begins. Nor do you start training on the day of the race. So too we cannot start strengthening our faith on the day of crisis (1 Tim 4:8).

"Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." 1 Corinthians 9:25

7. Discipleship training of every member (2 Tim 2:2)

Hierarchical churches with a clergy/laity division are easily infiltrated, manipulated and neutralised. Top heavy structures are easily decapitated by merely imprisoning the leaders. However, the churches that have flourished under persecution have invariably been those congregations with lay leadership. When every member is either discipling others or being disciplined themselves then the church can remain effective - even under persecution. "Each one reach one, each one bring one, each one teach one" is a winning strategy. Evangelism can add to the church, but discipleship can multiply. "The whole church, taking the whole Gospel, to the whole world."

"To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the Faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Ephesians 4:12-13

8. Home Bible study groups and prayer cells (Acts 2:42-47)

In times of state persecution church leaders can be imprisoned and church buildings can be confiscated or closed. However, it is always a far harder task to stamp out home Bible study groups and prayer fellowships. Congregations that depend upon their formal services in the church building are vulnerable. But congregations which consist of a network of prayer and Bible cell groups are far more resilient in times of stress.

"Greet also the church that meets at their house." Romans 16:5

9. Evangelise or fossilise (Luke 24:47)

We must never allow persecution to deter us from obeying the Great Commission. Our purpose on earth is to "make disciples...teaching obedience" Matt 28:19. The lifeblood of the persecuted church is zeal to reach the lost for Christ. Every interrogation is an opportunity to witness for Christ.

"I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Romans 1:16

10. Pray the Imprecatory Psalms (Acts 13:8-12)

One of the most striking aspects of persecuted churches is their love for the Psalms. While we tend to pray for peace, the persecuted pray for justice (Rev 6:9-11).

"When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evil doers." Proverbs 21:15

11. Be careful whom you trust (Matthew 24:4-5)

In times of state persecution churches will be infiltrated by spies and even established members could be recruited (blackmailed into being an informer). Therefore one would need to learn to no longer be too specific in testimonies and prayer requests. Some aspects of the church would have to be on a "need to know" basis.

"Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient." Ephesians 5:6

12. Cultivate a positive attitude of praise and thanksgiving (Phil 4:4-9)

Knowing the great God we serve and the inevitable victory of His Kingdom (Daniel 2:44) we need to continually count our blessings and rejoice.

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Dr Peter Hammond
Frontline Fellowship, P O Box 74, Newlands, 7725, Cape Town, South Africa
E-mail: admin@frontline.org.za