

September 2013

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## This World Is Not Our Home

Considering the plight of persecuted Christians

*Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also. --Hebrews 13:3*

**J**im Daly, President of *Focus on the Family*, has issued a call for America to consider matters beyond health care and the economy. "Our 24/7 news cycle," said Daly, "is consumed these days with American politicians sparring over the debt ceiling and the implementation of President Obama's controversial health care plan, both important debates to be sure. Meanwhile, the tragic fact that followers of Jesus Christ are being targeted and slaughtered across the globe is given scant attention."<sup>1</sup>

What Mr. Daly says is not hearsay. Christians are the world's most persecuted religious minority.

According to The Pew Forum, Christians face persecution in a staggering total of 133 countries, representing two-thirds of all nations on earth. The Germany-based International Society for Human Rights, a secular organization, estimates that 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world are directed against Christians.<sup>2</sup> But, as Mr. Daly says, the persecuted Church is just not making news headlines in America.

Admittedly, it is difficult for Americans to picture anyone being raped, tortured, imprisoned and even killed for a religious belief. Without a doubt, we are heirs of the greatest legacy our founders could have bequeathed—the protected free exercise of religion. But that legacy is squandered when America's leading officials are not dialed into the concerns of the Church—local or foreign.

More telling, even chilling, is the fact that Janet Napolitano, former director of the Department of Homeland Security, placed evangelicals on a watch list of potential domestic terrorist organizations.

The sad, unreported truth, is that upwards of 163,000 Christians in foreign lands are killed each year because they are considered either infidels or just plain enemies of the state. But according to Church historians, these are the realities that Christians have always had to consider when making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. What are the costs?

During an intense period of persecution from A.D. 100-to-A.D. 314, the Romans accused Christians of many crimes, including cannibalism (because of a misinterpretation of the meaning behind the communion elements), incest, (because Christians called each other "brother" and "sister"), and causing floods, droughts and other natural disasters by angering the gods.

Much like modern day evangelicals being watched as though they are potential terrorists, perhaps the most ridiculous charge against the early Church was that of *atheism*. The Roman world believed in many gods, who were represented by statues. The Christians believed in one invisible God and refused to worship the Roman gods, so the Romans considered them "atheists."

One of the many early Church leaders to be charged with the crime of atheism, was Polycarp, known to have been a disciple of John the Apostle and appointed to oversee the Church in Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey). According to his contemporaries, Polycarp had a startling dream one night that his pillow was on fire. Interpreting this to be a sign that he would be burned alive, he quickly wakened close friends to let them know what must occur.

Sure enough, the next day, February 23 in A.D. 155, local officials were at Polycarp's door. Without resisting, he requested one final hour to spend with the Lord in prayer. As a result, Polycarp was impressed in his heart that God was saying "Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man."

After the Roman proconsul was seated and the charges were read, Polycarp was given an opportunity to make amends by offering a token sacrifice in the name of Caesar, and of course, curse his atheist associates. It is thought the proconsul was hoping to spare Polycarp, perhaps due to his advanced age.

"Eighty-six years I have served the Lord," answered Polycarp. "He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"

When the proconsul threatened to have him burned at the stake if he did not say "Away with the atheists"—referring to the Christians, Polycarp replied, "You threaten me with the fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched, but you do not know the fire that awaits the wicked and the judgment to come into everlasting punishment. Why are you waiting? Come and do what you will."

As a final gesture, Polycarp turned the proconsul's command on its head. Pointing to the jeering mob, he cried out, "Away with the atheists!"

At that point, the great arena erupted in a frenzy. While spectators dashed to the exits to gather kindling and firewood, guards prepared to nail him to a stake. Stopping them, Polycarp said, "Leave me as I am. For he who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails."

Interestingly, accounts of Polycarp's final minutes vary. One narrative records that while Polycarp sang praises to God, the fire came right up to him without obvious harm. Finally, the soldiers became frustrated and thrust him through with spears. Most others say that as his flesh was consumed, it was "not as burning flesh but as bread baking or as gold and silver refined in a furnace." But, more importantly, all who witnessed and later reported the event agreed that Polycarp's death was remembered by "everyone—*he is even spoken of by the heathen in every place.*"

When Christians suffer and are put to death, it is not because God is indifferent or busy with other matters. The Word says; *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints* (Ps 116:15). As with Polycarp, it is a powerful declaration that eternal life is a free gift—but only through the Person of Jesus Christ.

Many ministry leaders believe that persecution will intensify as we get closer to the Lord's return. Pastor Greg Laurie of Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, California is one of them. Quoting Jesus, he says, *A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you* (John 15:20).

Laurie believes that persecution "will separate the real from the false, the genuine from the fake." He says it "causes us to cling more tightly to Jesus and remember that this world is not our home."<sup>3</sup>

*Rick Forcier*

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Daly, "Are American Christians Ignoring the Mayhem of the Middle East?," *Religion Today*, 9/30/2013

<sup>2</sup> [ucanews.com/news/persecution-kills-150000-christians-every-year/60090](http://ucanews.com/news/persecution-kills-150000-christians-every-year/60090), 9/12/2012

<sup>3</sup> Greg Laurie, "The Promise of Persecution," [www.christianity.com/church/persecution/the-promise-of-persecution-11577658.html](http://www.christianity.com/church/persecution/the-promise-of-persecution-11577658.html)