

Day 48
Wise as Serpents, Harmless as Doves!

Matthew 5:10-12 (MSG) *"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. 11-12 Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble."*

Persecution, affliction, trials and trouble, for the sake of Christ, is what many Christ followers have experienced around the world. We, in America, live in a culture where you can pursue any hobby or sport and no one will frown at it or even caution you to slow down. **But when you pursue Christ with the same intensity, people are very quick to remind you not to become fanatical. People spend billions of dollars and countless hours on all sorts of pursuits, yet frown when someone is willing to do the same for the sake of the Kingdom of God.** Jesus has clearly communicated to us what God sees as a blessed life, a life that is worthy to be sought after. A life that has the qualities and characteristics of the Father. A life that is lived to glorify God and to show others His mercy and grace. A life that is willing to be ridiculed and mocked and not to retaliate in the same way.

Maturity is the Father's goal for us. **Maturity is shown in the life of Jesus, not only for our spiritual reflection and inspiration, but for our clear example. Christ becomes our measure and model. We pattern our lives after Jesus' life, we look to Him for our motivation, and we willingly do what He showed us to do.** There is no greater life to emulate than the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This complete commitment to Christ exposes us to the possibility of persecution and even suffering. How we view this suffering and persecution reveals the level of our maturity and the measure of our commitment. Jesus tells us that, when we are being persecuted, we must respond with great joy. **"When you are reviled and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers—wonderful! 12 Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a tremendous reward awaits you up in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted too."** (Matthew 5:11-12 LB)

We can have great joy when we are being persecuted, because it shows that we belong to the Father. Remembering that we suffer because of the good we do, not because we do the wrong things. We can have great joy because it places us in a position to receive a tremendous reward in heaven. We can have great joy because we find ourselves in great company; such as, the ancient prophets. **Persecution is an opportunity to let our light shine so that those who do not know God can have a clear example of a life that is lived to the glory of God.** Jesus calls it our pulpit to proclaim Him to a lost world: **"Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves. 17 But beware! For you will be handed over to the courts and will be flogged with whips in the synagogues. 18 You will stand trial before governors and kings because you are my followers. But this will be your opportunity to tell the rulers and other unbelievers about me. 19 When you are arrested, don't worry about how to respond or what to say. God will give you the right words at the right time. 20 For it is not you who will be speaking—it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."** (Matthew 10:17-20 NLT)

God never abandons us in persecution, just the opposite. Jesus says it is an opportunity for us to tell others about Him. The Lord is so close to those who are suffering persecution that He says, when we are under that kind of scrutiny, we don't even have to worry about the words to speak because He will be

speaking through us. **Imagine God's presence filling you so completely that the words that are coming out of your mouth are not your own, but they come straight from the Spirit of our Heavenly Father.**

Although Jesus sends us out in vulnerability, we have the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom so that we can be shrewd but remain innocent. When you are being persecuted, God is actively working in you and through you. Blessed are those who are being persecuted for doing the right things because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them! The Father actively works through His mature, persecuted sons and daughters.

We cannot abdicate our identity as sons of God when we are being persecuted. We have to remain salt and light; otherwise, we lose the potential for influencing others towards God. Even if we are being accused wrongly or lied about, our lives must reflect the character of our Father. Peter writes: *"But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy. 11 Dear friends, I warn you as 'temporary residents and foreigners' to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls. 12 Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world. (1 Peter 2:9-12 NLT)*

Responding the right way shows our true identity, and it has the potential of silencing those who falsely accuse us. *"It is God's will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you. 16 For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil." (1 Peter 2:15-16 NLT)* None of us pray so that we would suffer. We do not desire or glorify suffering, but as Christ followers we have the potential to suffer. When we do suffer for Jesus sake, how we see it and navigate through it, will show who we truly follow. Peter continues and says, *"For God is pleased when, conscious of his will, you patiently endure unjust treatment. 20 Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you." (1 Peter 2:19-20 NLT)* Why would we patiently endure unjust treatment? First, we do it for the sake of those who do not know God, to show them God's unconditional love towards them. Jesus showed us the Father's love by dying for us before we even knew Him. Secondly, we endure unjust treatment because we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. *"For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:21 NLT)*

Being wise as serpents and harmless as doves can only be accomplished by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. We live in an angry world. We live in a world that cries out vengeance at every corner. When the world suffers, retaliation and revenge becomes the theme song. They did it to me, now I will do double back to them! Jesus did not use the example of a snake to indicate poison and vindictiveness. "Strike back when they least expect it," is that what Jesus had in mind? Absolutely not! Snakes have the ability to live in any environment, and are cunning enough to avoid being trapped or ensnared. So, we are not being ensnared by the traps of the enemy; we use wisdom by being shrewd like a snake. At the same time, we do not retaliate because we are harmless as a dove. Jesus suffered, but He never gave in to evil or deceived anyone, neither did He threaten revenge: *"He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. 23 He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly." (1 Peter 2:22-23 NLT)*

We are being sent into this world. We might have to suffer for the sake of Christ. In those moments, we rely on His presence, His power and His wisdom to lead us through. Just like Jesus, we leave our case in the hands of our Heavenly Father because He is the only one who judges fairly.

Reflection and Prayer:

- Take a moment and pray through today's list. (*Source: opendoorsusa.org*)

21 - UZBEKISTAN: Uzbek believers can be fined for possessing Christian literature or even having worship songs on a smartphone.

- **SOURCE OF PERSECUTION - Dictatorial paranoia**
- **LEADER - President Shavkat Mirziyoyev**
- **TOTAL POPULATION - 33,236,000**
- **CHRISTIAN POPULATION - 345,000 (1%)**
- **MAIN RELIGION - Islam**

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR CHRISTIANS IN UZBEKISTAN?

In the former Soviet republic, the government sees Christians in unregistered churches as a threat to its power. The Uzbek government allows no religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions. If they are found meeting together, believers may have their meetings raided and be arrested or fined for taking part in "illegal" religious activities. Church leaders are especially targeted—in an effort to cause a ripple effect of fear and anxiety among their congregations.

PRAYER POINTS:

- Pray that the new leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev would bring welcome changes and protection for the country's Christian population.
- Pray for our family who, right now, are behind bars for their faith. Ask God to provide powerful ways to encourage them and bring them His hope and peace.
- Ask God to guide and spiritually nourish church leaders in Uzbekistan, who face immense pressure for their role in discipling God's people.

Aziz's Story: 'I don't want anything to do with you!'

Uzbekistan, No. 21 on the 2021 World Watch List, is the most dangerous country in Central Asia to be a Christian. No religious activities beyond state-run and state-controlled institutions are allowed. And if an Uzbek person leaves Islam to follow Jesus, they face rejection and attack by their neighbors, and even their own family members.

"Aziz," tells his story:

"After my conversion to Christianity, my brother wanted to have nothing to do with me. Again and again, he became very angry as soon as he saw me and said: 'Go away, what are you doing here? I don't want anything to do with you!' For 20 years, we did not have contact with each other. "About four years ago, my nephew, the son of my brother, became a believer. Because he was so afraid of how his father would respond, he came to my house with his wife and children. Not long after, I got a phone call from my brother: 'If my son is in your house, I will set your house on fire, with everything and everyone in it!'

"That was a serious threat. So, my nephew and his family fled to another place. But one day, his father caught him and wanted to kill his son. He didn't succeed, but he beat him up terribly. My nephew was

taken to the hospital. He had to be operated on, and his nose was broken. “Surprisingly, about a year ago, it seemed [my brother’s] attitude changed a bit. He was so ill that he could only lie in bed. I visited him and asked if I could pray for him. And for the very first time, I was able to tell him about the gospel. “The heart of my oldest brother is becoming softer and softer. And he is in contact again with both his son and me.”

Please pray for Aziz and his family and for the salvation of his brother.

22 - LAOS: In rural areas, Laotian house churches meet underground because they are considered “illegal gatherings.”

- **SOURCE OF PERSECUTION - Clan oppression**
- **LEADER - President Bounnhang Vorachit**
- **TOTAL POPULATION - 7,165,000**
- **CHRISTIAN POPULATION - 199,000 (2.8%)**
- **MAIN RELIGION - Buddhism**

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR CHRISTIANS IN LAOS?

In Laos, the communist authorities heavily monitor any Christian activities, including those of registered churches. Both church leaders and believers have been detained or imprisoned. Life is especially difficult for converts to the Christian faith, who are at risk of persecution from their family and the local authorities. This can involve damage to property, confiscation of possessions, and fines. When a convert’s family stir up the local community against them, opposition may become violent.

PRAYER POINTS:

- Give thanks for the growth of the church in Laos; pray that God will continue to use His people to bring them greater knowledge of Jesus’ love.
- Pray that believers under pressure to recant their faith will have strength to stand firm.
- Pray for families and churches left without the support and leadership of a husband and/or leader; pray that all their needs would be met and that it would be an opportunity for others to grow and thrive.

23 - TURKMENISTAN: In Turkmenistan, church leaders are attacked in places where the church is growing through evangelism.

- **SOURCE OF PERSECUTION - Dictatorial paranoia**
- **LEADER - President Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov**
- **TOTAL POPULATION - 6,031,000**
- **CHRISTIAN POPULATION - 68,000 (1.1%)**
- **MAIN RELIGION - Islam**

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR CHRISTIANS IN TURKMENISTAN?

Persecution against Christians in this repressive Islamic state comes largely from the government and from society. The government imposes many restrictions on church life. Unless their churches are registered, Christians are highly susceptible to police raids, threats, arrests and fines. The printing or importing of Christian materials is also restricted. Believers who come from Muslim backgrounds experience intense pressure from families, friends and villagers to deny their faith.

PRAYER POINTS:

- Pray for an easing of heavy restrictions on churches in Turkmenistan.
- Pray for the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of church leaders, who live and lead under intense government pressure.
- Ask that believers who come to Christ from Muslim backgrounds will be guarded from harm, and that families, friends and villagers will be powerfully impacted by the transformation in their lives.

24 - ALGERIA: The majority of Christians in Algeria are converts from Islam.

- **SOURCE OF PERSECUTION - Islamic oppression**
- **LEADER - President Abdelmadjid Tebboune**
- **TOTAL POPULATION - 43,333,000**
- **CHRISTIAN POPULATION - 129,000 (0.3%)**
- **MAIN RELIGION - Islam**

WHAT IS LIFE LIKE FOR CHRISTIANS IN ALGERIA?

In Algeria, Christian converts are most at risk of persecution, not just from their family and extended family, but also from local ethnic leaders and elders. Laws regulating non-Muslim worship prohibit anything that would “shake the faith of a Muslim.” In the past three years, authorities in Algeria have engaged in a systematic campaign against EPA churches (Protestant Church of Algeria), which has seen 13 churches forcibly closed by authorities. Others have received orders to cease all activities.

PRAYER POINTS:

- Pray that all recently closed churches will reopen, and the 2006 law regulating worship will be repealed.
- Request that converts who have counted the cost for following Jesus will have access to a community of Christians to support and build them up.
- Pray for the establishment of strategic relationships between Christians and local leaders of influence, which will inspire greater respect among communities towards Christianity.

32 - BURKINA FASO - Open Doors estimates there are over 1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Burkina Faso, and many are Christians. Extremist attacks have driven followers of Jesus from their homes and villages, with many being forced into refugee camps, and there are no open churches in parts of northeastern Burkina Faso. Low rainfall and the COVID-19 pandemic have worsened the situation. Christians who have converted from Islam also face significant pressure and opposition from their families and communities.

33 - TAJIKISTAN - In Tajikistan, all religious activities must be approved by the government, and it is common for churches—particularly Protestant—to be raided by authorities. Christians can be detained if they are found to have any Christian materials that aren't government-approved. Additionally, the Tajik ethnic identity is directly tied to Islam. That is why Christians who have converted from Islam bear the brunt of persecution at the hands of the state and from family, friends and community.

34 - NEPAL - In Nepal, converts from Hinduism are put under the most pressure; they are viewed as deviating from the faith of the ancestors, and therefore breaking with their culture and their national identity. Converts—and members of Protestant churches—experience pressure from family, friends, community and local authorities. In some areas, Christians were also left out of government COVID-19 relief, re-emphasizing their status as second-class citizens.

35 - CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC - The Central African Republic has seen near-constant conflict and fighting since 2013. Much of the country is occupied by various armed militia groups, who—whether Islamic extremist or otherwise—specifically target Christians, so life is constantly uncertain for believers in areas under militia control. Christian leaders who have publicly denounced the violence have been threatened; church buildings have been burned and ransacked. Additionally, converts to Christianity from Islam also face persecution from their immediate family and community.