

## **OVERCOMERS IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION**

### **Revelation 12: 10-12**

Persecution has always existed! Christians across the ages have experienced it again and again. It comes in various forms: societal, emotional, economical and physical ... even to the point of martyrdom.

In Revelation, chapter 12, John, the writer, is given a glimpse of a day when our battle will be over, but he is also given the keys to how the people of his day and ours could deal with it. In fact, we could be “overcomers.” What a tremendous word!

As we see persecution spreading today, it is well for us to take heed of these keys, apply them to our circumstances and pray for our brothers and sisters around the world that they, as well, may both learn and apply them during their difficult times.

Let us examine four keys:

#### I. THEY EXPECTED PERSECUTION, SO MUST WE (12:10)

- A. Because of our Identification with Jesus  
Jesus had warned His disciples that He would be hated and because of their/our relationship with Him we would suffer too.
- B. Because of the Intense Anger of Satan.  
Satan is portrayed as one who, in his anger, would go about this earth as a 'roaring lion' in an attempt to destroy the followers, the family, the faithful of Jesus.

We dare not be naive! Expect persecution!

#### II. THEY EXPERIENCED GENUINE SALVATION, SO MUST WE (12:11a)

- A. Salvation Received  
They did not overcome because they were good, or because of their heritage or wealth. They overcame because they had received God's gracious salvation through Jesus' shed blood and glorious resurrection (I Peter 1:18-19). They knew that they were His!
- B. Salvation's Results
  1. God's presence ... He was with them.
  2. God's protection ... He would uphold them.
  3. God's power ... He would use them.
  4. God's promises ... What He said, He would do!

They would never be separated from His love!

### III. THEY DECLARED GOD'S MESSAGE, SO MUST WE (12:11b)

When they shared their testimony, even if it cost them their lives, they experienced God's blessings.

#### A. The Blessing of Boldness

Again and again, people marveled at their boldness. The authorities could not silence them ... the crowds could not silence them. The more they were persecuted ... the bolder they became.

#### B. The Blessing of Bounty

Who can deny the influence and impact of their testimonies?

1. Stephen testifying while being stoned.
2. Young Saul of Tarsus watching and listening, not knowing he would become the zealous follower of the same Jesus of whom Stephen testified, a champion for Jesus!

Share your testimony. It is undeniable and powerful! It is a key to overcoming.

### IV. THEY ENVISIONED ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE, SO MUST WE (12:11c)

They were not caught up in the world's philosophy of "He who finishes with the most toys wins." They saw the world for what it was — a small speck in the spectrum of eternity. They looked at everything through the filter of eternity.

All too often we have been influenced by the "live for the now" folks. We must get back to the biblical perspective that says: "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through." Jesus told us not to lay up treasure here where it is subject to decay and death, but to lay it up in heaven where it will reap eternal reward.

We can be overcomers ... we **MUST BE OVERCOMERS!**

I have met with some overcomers. For example, I remember the five men who dared to take gospel tracts into the Muslim Festival to tell people about Jesus. They were arrested, beaten and imprisoned. One of them was beaten so severely that one arm had to be amputated at the shoulder. I asked him what he was going to do now. He looked at me and with a note of boldness replied, "I'm going back! That's what I'm going to do!" He and his fellow workers were **OVERCOMERS**. They had discovered the keys and were and are using them day by day. They are living testimonies in the furnace of persecution!

May we be faithful to Jesus during these days and pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering for Christ around the world!

## **MURDER IN THE CHURCH**

### **Acts 7:60-8:1a; Acts 12:1-2**

In 2008, a Baptist church in Florida was shaken to its very core. Within the span of 3 months and 5 days, they witnessed the death of their senior pastor and their minister of music and worship.

The 44-year-old senior pastor and his 13-year-old son were killed when the airplane the pastor was piloting went down in the mountains of North Carolina. The 47-year-old music and worship minister died three months later when he suffered a heart attack.

These two events have raised many questions, both within the church and the community. It is common to hear people ask: “Why?”, “What did we do wrong?”, “Did we or these men commit some terrible sin?”, “What do we do now?”, “What about our finances?”, “Will our people leave?” and “What will happen to their families?” The pastor left a widow and five young children. The music minister left a widow and two 7-year-old children.

These are both tragic, indeed — one of them an accident, the other a health issue. But let us suppose the circumstances were different. Let us suppose they had both been murdered. That would make the events even worse ... frightening, if you please. The questions would be even greater. That is exactly what happened in the early church at Jerusalem. They, too, suffered the loss of two leaders, an Apostle and a deacon; Stephen and James ... both murdered, martyred.

The accounts are to be found in Acts 7-8 and Acts 12:1-2.

Three lessons emerge from these passages:

#### **I. THE REALITY OF PERSECUTION**

Jesus had warned them that there would be persecution because of their identity with Him. Jerusalem was fresh from the frenzy of the attempt to crown Him that wound up with crucifying Him as a blasphemer. The wounds were raw and deep.

##### **A. The Pattern of Persecution**

It begins with threats (Acts 4), escalates to beatings and imprisonment (Acts 5, 6), and then moves to murder and martyrdom. As the church became a church of purity and power, the persecution was stepped up. A sinful, impure church does not offend either Satan or the world. “All who live Godly WIL suffer persecution.”

##### **B. The Purpose of Persecution**

Satan’s purpose was to destroy them. It still is! God’s purpose was to refine them and send them and prove to them He knew their plight and would see them through!

## II. THE RESPONSE TO PERSECUTION

### A. They were Scared

But this would give God the opportunity to show His faithfulness. They could depend upon His Word. It's human nature to be scared, but God uses this for His purpose. But what was His purpose?

### B. They were Scattered

Many believe the church would have been happy to have just settled down in Jerusalem. But God had other plans ... the uttermost parts of the world. He took them out of their familiar surroundings and sent them packing, along with the gospel to the regions beyond, first to the Jew and unto the Gentiles and other continents.

## III. THE RESULTS OF PERSECUTION

### A. They became as Magnets for the Lord Jesus Christ

They obeyed His instructions, "Blessed are you when men revile and persecute ... rejoice and be glad," (Matt 5:11) ... you join great company. Someone of yesteryear said, 'Get on fire for God and the world will come to see you burn.' People are drawn by God's Spirit to those who are willing to serve Him and suffer for Him.

The Wurmbrands and the ministry of VOM are reminders of this truth. As it was said of Abel in Hebrews 11, He being dead yet speaketh, so it is of this ministry to the persecuted church, they being dead still speak of God's power and protection.

### B. The Word of God was Multiplied

In the beginning days of the church the Lord "added" to the church daily (Acts 2). But in the throes of persecution and its aftermath ... the Lord "multiplied" His church and His Word.

I am sure we all know the difference between adding to and multiplying. May God's Word and work be MULTIPLIED!

Bonnie and Gary Weatherall were serving God faithfully in a Muslim-dominated nation. The work was difficult without much fruit. One day they were attacked by terrorists and Bonnie was martyred. The calling and desire still remained in Gary's heart. But could he even think of returning?

In more recent days, Gary has remarried. His new bride is the granddaughter of a martyred missionary, a lady with a unique preparation to go with him to this dangerous field. That was the offer he made her, and return he did. God showed His faithfulness as these magnets went back as testimonies of both

His faithfulness and theirs. This time it was to multiplied numbers of people coming to see people who loved God and loved them— people who were poured out in service to Jesus.

**PASTOR, TEACH US TO PRAY**  
**Luke 11:1**

One day, Jesus was with His disciples and they noted His prayer life. They saw His fervency and they saw the results. So they asked Him for a lesson in prayer. They asked that He would teach them to be effective in prayer.

If you are like me, you often feel inadequate in prayer. We do not want our prayers to take on the note of “sameness,” to sound like the same old thing again. Most of us do not know many missionaries or persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ. We rely on publications ... like VOM’s monthly publications. These are wonderful helps for us and I am so grateful for them, because they help us pray intelligently for our family around the world.

When we do not know how to pray, we can also rely upon the “Holy Spirit,” to help us intercede on behalf of the persecuted. (Rom 8:26-27.)

Thank you for observing the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Pastor, we are praying that this opportunity will help your people pray intelligently and effectively for the persecuted church.

Here is a list of requests that our persecuted brethren would ask us to pray:

1. Pray for faithful disciples, people who will be faithful, no matter what the cost (1 Cor 4:9-14, 16).
2. Pray their faithfulness, even in suffering, will be the magnet that draws others to Christ (Ps 91).
3. Pray for God’s grace and strength for persecuted believers to forgive their persecutors (Rom 8:11).

(Read the testimonies of the Wurmbrands, Corrie Ten Boom, the *New Foxes Book of Martyrs*.)

4. Pray that those who are persecuted will have opportunities to share Christ with their persecutors (Colossian 4:3).
5. Pray for the release of pastors and other believers who have been falsely accused and imprisoned (Luke 6:27-28).
6. Pray for boldness and courage for believers in the face of fear (Isa 40:29-31).
7. Pray the Holy Spirit will bring understanding, conviction and salvation to persecutors. (2 Cor 4:3-6).
8. Pray that persecuted Christians (and us as well) would lovingly and obediently respond in the Spirit and service of Christ (John 20:21).
9. Pray that fields white for harvest will be reached while there is time (John 4:34-36).

10. Having prayed for them ... then be willing to say, “Lord, Here Am I, Send Me,” (Isa 6:8).

Not long ago I stood in the midst of 50 or 60 young people, residents of a hostile land that does not know Jesus. They were training to go and tell their people the “Good News of salvation,” knowing it could well cost them their lives. I saw their dedication and their fervency. Several of us prayed over them and asked God to anoint them with His favor and power. I walked out of that room, saw the lostness of their land and said, “I must pray for them! I must support them! I must lift them!” I pray you will join us in this endeavor for people like them around the world!

## **LESSONS FROM PAUL THE PERSECUTED**

### **Philippians 4**

The Philippians' Letter is one of the most interesting letters in the Bible. It was written from a prison by the Apostle Paul. Think about it: The man who had been the "chief" persecutor of the early church was now in prison himself, the tables had been turned; the persecutor was now the persecuted. He was writing from a dark, dank cell, living in his own refuse. The conditions were degrading for this man who was once the fair-haired scholar of the Jews. Yet, from this prison cell he wrote a letter in which he used the word "joy" four times, and the word "rejoicing" nine times. How did he do this? Did he receive some special dispensation that enabled him to do this? Was he so special that God would do this for him but no one else?

The answer is to be learned from a word Paul uses twice. He says, "I have learned ..." It was not something that just happened — he "learned."

There are some real lessons for us to "learn" as we pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ; lessons that will be valuable for them and us.

#### **I. THE VALUE OF PRAYER AND CARE OF THE CHURCHES (4:10, 14-16)**

It was there in a prison cell that Paul learned how much the prayers and care of the Philippian church really meant to him.

One of the striking lessons I have learned from visiting the persecuted in their homelands is the surprise they exhibit when we tell them that believers in free countries know their plight and are praying for them and care about them. You can see their eyes light up and their heart rejoice just to think that someone in a distant land, someone whom they have never met, loves them and is praying for them.

Let me encourage you to get involved in some kind of project that supports them. Every Bible study group can do something. VOM has a variety of projects available whether it's sending blankets or writing a card that will say, "Somebody knows about you, loves you and is praying for you."

#### **II. THE VIRTUE OF CONTENTMENT (4:11-12)**

As a leader, Paul had led the good life. Now there were adjustments to be made. Living in a stinking jail cell was not easy. Yet God taught him, and he learned the lesson of contentment.

This lesson is not learned easily, especially for those of us in the USA. The lesson of sacrifice is something we struggle with. We have raised a generation of children who have an air of entitlement. Just give me stuff because I want it. The attitude stretches into young adulthood in our society. One nation has dubbed them "KIPPERS" — Kids in Parent's Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings.

We must learn the lesson of contentment, being willing to sacrifice for the cause of Christ and the sake of the persecuted.

### III. THE VOICE OF SUFFERING (1:12-14)

The word suffering is sometimes a frightening word. But Paul learned a valuable lesson about it. Sometimes we suffer because we get off track and make wrong choices and bad decisions. Most of the time we understand this aspect. This is judgment. But other times it's not judgment, it's refinement that burns away the dross of the world, weeds out the superficial, and strengthens our faith. It is the reservoir out of which we draw obedience. (Heb 5:8)

Suffering is a voice we must all learn to hear as God uses life's circumstances to make us more like Jesus. (3:10)

### IV. THE VICTORY OF JESUS (4:13)

Paul learned that his education, his heritage and his brilliance were all as nothing when it came to this battle. His strength and victory were in Jesus, and so is ours!

We often think we can win God's battle through budgets and buildings, personalities and programs. While these may have a place, we must keep our eyes on Jesus. He must be our focus.

Others place their focus on their circumstances and find them too difficult to even entertain the thought of victory. Again, the focus must be Jesus!

One of my favorite Old Testament stories is found in 2 Chronicles 20, when three nations come to do battle with Jehoshaphat. He gets word that there are even more entering the fray. He goes to God and tells Him what is happening, that they are terribly outnumbered and face defeat and slaughter. So God says, "I guess that means the ball's in My court ... well, here's what you do ... go get the choir, go to the valley of battle and begin to sing praises to Me (20:21-22)." Now I must admit that sounds crazy. But they did it. The result? The enemy armies began to slaughter each other!

Friends, never lose focus! Keep your eyes on Jesus!

### V. THE VALIDITY OF FAITH (4:19)

From a prison cell, Paul writes and says, "you can count on God ... He will keep His Word. Your faith is valid ... it's true, He is Truth! He will supply ALL your needs!" Paul never lost his faith! In his final testimony he said he had fought in a good fight ... finished his God-given course ... kept the faith! He knew there was a crown awaiting for him and all those who love His appearing.

The faith issue is vital!

I think about John the Baptizer, the forerunner, the way maker for Jesus. When those two expectant mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, met, baby John leapt within his mother. He had met and affirmed Jesus before either of them were born.

Jesus affirmed John as the best man born of woman. But before his martyrdom, John's faith wavered. He sent messengers to Jesus with a question, "Are you really the one? The Christ? Or should we look for another?" Jesus responded in interesting words when He said "... Go and report to John ... the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL REACHED TO THEM. And blessed is he who keeps from stumbling over ME (Matt 11:1-6)."

Pray for the persecuted and for us in the United States, that our faith will always be vital and valid, that our focus will always be Jesus, that we may hear the voice of suffering and allow for the refining process in our lives, that we will learn contentment in spite of our circumstances, and that we will know the strength of praying for others even as they pray for us.