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International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, I just again, I thank you for your word, I thank you for the gift of that word and the privilege that we have each week to come before you to open up your book, to pray that your Holy Spirit would guide us as we go into your word and learn more and more about how to live our life in this day and age in this culture. I pray your Holy Spirit's accompaniment today as we are again looking at the role of prayer and the role of the persecuted church. And so I pray especially for your Spirit to guide us, come before us, give us the ability to take in your word and to again make it of lasting value, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, this Sunday is IDOP Sunday, and IDOP in case you don't know, IDOP stands for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And IDOP Sunday is about two very distinct, two very critical issues that the church is called to. One is prayer and the other one obviously is the persecuted church and this is the Sunday where we attempt to put both of those together. It is a day given to turn our attention to prayer for those who are willing to

pay the price of publicly acknowledging Christ as Lord and Savior. And this morning I want to revisit the teaching I give each year about IDOP and it's essentially a yearly report of our commitment to the persecuted church basically updated for where we are today and what we've seen in this past year. And pursuant to that I want to give a state of the church opinion on how we are doing so far this year. So bear with me if you've heard some of this before.

And let me start out by restating the official IDOP pronouncement. It says this: "The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church (IDOP) is a global day of intercession for persecuted Christians worldwide. Its primary focus is the work of intercessory prayer and citizen action on behalf of persecuted communities of the Christian faith. We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it."

You know, we need a day like today because we are really easily distracted from this task. There's a persecuted church out there that desperately needs our prayer and there is us who desperately need to learn how to pray. And to do that we first need to understand the critical importance of praying for the persecuted church. And so this morning I want to address the same issue I address each year. And the question starts, the big question that

we want to address, that kind of the overarching question for all of this is why should I pray? I mean to put this cynically, we at Grace put enormous stock in the sovereignty of God. I mean we believe that God controls every single molecule in this universe including the lives of the saints and of their persecutors. We believe that God is not walking around heaven biting his nails hoping things are going to work out. And so it begs this question. The question is: If God is truly sovereign, why does he need us to pray for somebody on the other side of the world? I mean, why can't he just say that one part of the Lord's prayer that covers it all? Why can't we just say, okay, God, thy kingdom come, thy will be done. After all it is his kingdom and his will that will be done. So how can we imagine that there's a sovereign God who is somehow stopped in his tracks by our failure to pray? Well the answer is he's not. But then why does he still insist that we pray? Well, this morning I want to explore some possibilities. And the first one goes back to what I might seem to be harping on because I talk about it all of the time and it's the concept that we are at war, that we are right in the middle of a proxy war between two great kingdoms. There's the kingdom of light and there's the kingdom of darkness and our role in this war is as the bearers of God's image. We are the only creatures in all of creation who have been given this task and we are also specifically targeted by God's enemy, Satan. I mean we're the ones that Satan

caused to fall by tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and would it not follow that one of God's primary weapons against that same kingdom of darkness, well, that it would be us? I mean, we're the very ones who were dragged into that darkness by Satan through the fall of Adam and Eve. I mean think about this for a second, God is omnipotent, he's all powerful, he certainly could have destroyed Satan and the kingdom of darkness on his own by himself. After all, Satan was created by God. But what if, what if God in his wisdom elected to destroy Satan and the kingdom of darkness by redeeming and then by employing the very image bearers that Satan had successfully corrupted? You know *Ephesians 6* tells us one thing we know for a fact, we are at war. Listen to what it says. It says: *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* Now we don't do the actual wrestling here, I mean you and I have never gone toe to toe, mano a mano with an angel but the angels can and do and they do so on a regular basis. And this is just a what if. But what if the angels in heaven, what if they have to wait to hear from us before they act? I mean what if God's kingdom is similar to ours in that it enacts and it has rules similar to the rules that we have, I mean, go back to Hurricane Katrina. When that hurricane struck, one of the biggest complaints was the response by our government in the hours

right after that destruction. You had all of the resources of the federal government. In many cases those resources just sat there and they were never being utilized and it turns out the reason why they were never deployed is because they were never asked for. You see, the federal government in its wisdom long ago decided that it would be unwise for them to unilaterally decide to enter a state for any reason including disaster relief without some kind of implicit invitation. And so one of the major issues back then that's apparently been fixed is that the states affected either forgot to ask or they ignored that as a necessity. *ABC News* speaking of the aftermath of Katrina said: "There's no question the federal government plays a major role in disaster relief. But federal officials say in order to get involved, they must first be asked to do so by state officials."

So what if God in his wisdom had a similar arrangement? What if God demanded that the angels in heaven had to wait to respond till they were asked by humans? I mean I can't say with certainty that that's the way heaven works but in the 10th chapter of Daniel there is recorded a meeting that Daniel has with an angel. This is what the angel says. This is *Daniel 10*. He says: "*O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak to you, and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you.*" And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling. Then he said to me, "Fear

not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words." Here's an angel himself describing an action that he has taken that is directly the result of a human being, that's Daniel, praying. I mean the angel came directly as the result of Daniel's prayer. What if that is the norm? Well, that would explain God's repeated imploring of us to pray without ceasing according to *1 Thessalonians 5:17* or *1 Timothy 2*, it says: *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all people,* or Jesus's own words in *Luke 18*, he says: *And then he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*

You see, there's no doubt that there's one thing that God sees about our prayers and that they are absolutely critical. And the organizers of IDOP see that as well. This is their official statement on prayer for the persecuted church. They say this. They make four statements. They say: Number one, we believe that prayer changes things. Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith. That's number two. God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing, number three. And number four, persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray. And so this

morning I want to unpack that statement. I want to go line by line looking at the first statement: "We believe that prayer changes things." You know that's a very tough sell today. The events of this past week have put into sharp focus how much our culture belittles the idea that prayer changes things. I mean last Sunday in Texas we had a taste of what the persecuted church in much of the world has lived with and they've lived with it for years. People engaged in the simple act of worship were mowed down and murdered by someone whose hatred for God and his kingdom drove him to slaughter anyone and everyone who he thought represented that kingdom. And as horrific as the actual murders were, they were followed up by a sentiment that could only come from a culture that is way, way down the road of having turned its back on God. A *Huffington Post* article entitled: "People Fed Up With 'Thoughts And Prayers' Demand Action After Texas Church Massacre" featured many, many different Twitter posts and I just -- let me give you a couple of them: "They were in church. They had the prayer shot right out of them. Maybe try something else." Or "To all those asking for thoughts and prayers for the victims of church shooting, it seems like your direct line to God is not working" or "The victims were literally in a church. Your prayers are worthless. You need to actually do something." There's a sentiment in there that I do actually get. You know, if politicians were simply using empty rhetoric of false prayers as an excuse for inaction, well

they're engaging in conduct that scripture itself decries. *James 2* says: *Faith by itself, if it doesn't have works, is dead.* We know that God expects both. We know that Nehemiah built a wall but he built a wall by praying and posting a guard. And so if prayer is nothing but an excuse for inaction, these people would have a point. But in this case many people have pure scorn for those who turn to God when things turn awful.

I mean, there's a reason why many folks are upset and scornful about prayer. It's because they don't know what prayer is all about. I mean, what do these folks who are so upset about praying think prayer is for? And what is their measure? What's their measure, how do they determine what is an effective prayer? You see, I think most of these people equate prayer with magic. And if the magic isn't working, well then obviously it's time to abandon it. The problem isn't really with prayer and its effectiveness, it's with the idea of what prayer is supposed to accomplish. I think these folks have it perfectly backwards. I mean these folks who made their sentiments known think prayer is a way of bending God's will to mine when in fact it is precisely the opposite. You see, prayer is God's way of bending my will, my will towards his. And that is primarily about lining up my will with the kingdom of God.

You know, it's been said that the kingdom of God is like a freight train and it's moving from eternity past through the present to the eternity that is future and the culmination of all things. And you know, there's three things that you can do with a freight train. You can catch it, you can miss it, or you can oppose it. You know, if you oppose it, in one way or another in the short term or the long term, you're obviously going to get flattened by it. I mean just ask every single atheist regime that once thought it was going to conquer the world that's now been consigned to the dust heap of history. You can miss it also. And lots and lots of people do. They more or less live their lives like animals thinking that life itself consists of eating, sleeping and reproducing. Or you can get on board. And prayer is how you get on board. It's how you begin to line up your hearts, your minds, your spirits and your bodies to the kingdom and its goals. The reason why people see prayer as so completely ineffective is because they've basically reduced it to magic. You know, God is the master magician and church is the physical place where the magic is expected to have its greatest strength. I mean having your prayers go unanswered in a church of all places, well that's got to mean that prayers don't work. I mean how is this different from any other primitive sacrifice offered up in some ancient civilization? I do my good works, I show up in church for heaven's sake, I'm at least entitled to have my prayer for safety answered. Well, if I pray for what I

want, whether it be health or wealth or in this case physical security and I get what I'm asking for, then my prayer works. That's pretty much how magic works. I mean it's really no different than appealing to the gods through some type of sacrifice so that they'll see things your way and maybe make your life go a little easier. But that's not at all what prayer is about. When I pray as God would have me pray, what changes is not only the object of my prayer but the subject as well. I become more and more enabled to get on board with God and his kingdom. And of course sometimes prayer does include the miraculous. I mean scripture is filled with instances where people prayed and miracles happened. God can and he does miraculously intervene in the lives of his children but more often than not the miracle of prayer is that God gives us something much more valuable than health or wealth or safety. What he gives us is his presence. And that power and that presence is what changes everything. What he gives to his saints is the ability to handle anything, and I mean anything, that this world can throw at them. I would submit to you in terms of effectiveness, in terms of how prayer changes things, that the events of last week demonstrate conclusively how prayer does thing change everything. Listen to the words of Pastor Frank Pomeroy of First Baptist Church Sutherland Springs, Texas. He's just lost his 14-year-old daughter and basically his entire church has been slaughtered while he was away. "What do you tell the other

grieving families?" he was asked. This was his response: "I'm still working on that. Christ is the one who is going to be lifted up. And that is what I am telling everybody. You lean into what you don't understand. You lean on the Lord. I would submit this to all of you. Whatever life brings you, lean on the Lord rather than your own understanding. I don't understand, but I know my God does. And that's where I'll leave it." Now folks, either they mock that thinking or they ignore it or they get it. And when they get it, they get that the promise of Christ is never, if you do A, B, C, and D then I will give you an easy life, a healthy life, a wealthy life, a successful life. What he does promise though is that no matter what life hands you including the slaughter of your daughter and your church, he will get you through it.

One of the most famous scriptures in all of the Bible is Psalm 23. *Psalm 23:4* says: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. But there's a reason why. For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.* Do you hear what God is promising? What he's saying is he's going to accompany us in a way that only people who've been through it can know. Those who are outside of the immediate circumstance who have not received that grace will either marvel at the strength that they see or they're going to mock it. They're going to claim that it's a fake and a farce because they don't get it. And I know

because I've been there myself. I have received that grace. I've said before you don't get boiling oil grace until you fall into boiling oil. And Pastor Pomeroy was thrown into boiling oil by the actions of a deranged murderer. And it goes without saying it's next to impossible to understand or wrap your mind around it but his words are absolutely true and they point out exactly what God promises he's going to give us when he can say in light of unspeakable tragedy, "Whatever life brings you, lean on the Lord rather than on your own understanding. I mean I don't understand but my God does and that's where I'll leave it." That's what persecuted saints understand, that God's presence will sustain you and empower you through anything that life can throw at you.

Now does prayer actually change things? Well the answer is yes and no. Is it magic? Will it enable you to somehow manipulate God to do things that you want done? No. Is it a means of changing virtually everything about me, whether it's physical, mental, spiritual, psychological or social to line my life up with where the kingdom is, then yes, that's the answer. And you know, we discovered how this works by looking and broadening our appearance and what we're understanding by reading books like Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of God*. He gave us an insight as to how to pray for persecuted Christians that I never, never thought of before. This is what Ripken says. He says: "For decades the Western church has

been taught to pray and work for an end to the persecution of fellow believers around the world. We enlist our congregations, our denominations, and even our governments to speak out and pressure oppressive regimes and hostile nations to end discrimination. Sometimes we even demand that the persecutors be punished." But listen to what Ripken has to say about what the persecuted themselves really, really want in prayer. Listen to what he says. He says, "We seem to forget that Jesus himself promised that the world would reject and mistreat his faithful followers just as it rejected him. Ruth --" that's his wife -- "Ruth and I have seldom encountered a mature believer living in persecution who asked us to pray that their persecution would cease. We have never heard that request. Rather, believers in persecution ask us to pray that 'they would be faithful and obedient through their persecution and suffering.'" Folks, that's a radically different prayer than what we would think it would be. You see, when God gives those who are suffering persecution the gift of his presence, they find it so precious that no matter what the persecution, it seems worth it. You know, Ripken's book details people undergoing horrific persecution and insisting this is a small price to pay for the gift that we've received, the intense privilege of God's Holy Spirit. And that testimony alone is proof positive that prayer changes things. So yes, we can affirm the first statement, "We believe that prayer changes

things."

The second statement says: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." And again to repeat what I said last time, it's this: This is a fact. All answered prayer begins and ends in the throne room of God. I won't go into it this morning but I've gone into it many, many times. I say when we pray, we're really part of a complex process that God uses to move things on this earth. And when God wants to move a mountain, he doesn't just move the mountain, he first moves people to begin to pray that that mountain would be moved and then he responds to that prayer. You see, ultimately God is behind everything that we do including our prayer. This is what he says in *Philippians 2*, he says: *For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure.* What God's saying is it's me that stirs you to pray. Oftentimes when we gather for corporate prayer we spend a few moments just silently asking God to speak through us. We try to use that moment to ask God to take that to give us the ability to give voice to the prayers that he wants us to pray because somehow our voices raised in prayer is crucial, crucial to the kingdom. I mean we recognize how important a role we have when we see what God has to say about the Holy Spirit's role in prayer and this is what he says in *Romans 8:26*. He says: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself*

intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Now you need to think about this for a second. You need to consider what God is saying here. What he's saying is your role as prayers is so crucial, is so incredibly important that God sends his Holy Spirit to come alongside us to guide us. God's saying in his Spirit that the Spirit recognizes that we are weak and that we pretty much stink at prayer. That's -- we don't pray as we ought, that's really what it means. He goes on to say that God searches hearts and he already knows the mind of the Spirit and that the Holy Spirit's job or one of his jobs is to intercede for us before God according to God's will. And it's like the Holy Spirit takes our earthbound sin-crusted efforts as human beings and then he shapes them and he polishes them and then he presents them to God for a response. So the Spirit of God works in and with us to empower and translates our efforts. Again, you have to stop and think for a minute, you have to realize just how much effort God puts into our prayer. I think about it and I can only imagine it's ridiculously tedious and overwhelmingly inefficient to utilize creatures whose attention span's basically measured in seconds, maybe minutes, who frequently forget, who frequently pray for the wrongs things with the wrong motives and probably spend half of their time in prayer daydreaming or simply wandering around in a

fog. This is what God is dealing with. So he sends his Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness. And the only logical reason that I can think of for God to go to such great lengths to involve us is that we have no idea how critical the role we play in this is.

The prophet Samuel gives us a hint of how important prayer is when he says this in *1 Samuel 12*. He says: *"Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you."* You and I might not think that prayerlessness is sinful but according to the prophet Samuel it is. And because God's sovereign purpose is never thwarted by my sin when I refuse to pray, God simply raises up another to take my place because the human aspect of prayer is that critical. So prayer is indeed a mystery but one that human beings play an incredibly critical part in and so the second statement from IDOP is true: "Exactly what happens in prayer is a mystery of faith" and much of it is still mysterious. But do you know the great mystery is that God would make us such a critical part of his work on earth.

And that leads to statement three which says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." And again do you see why? It's because God for some reason stoops to conquer. I mean there's no question that anything that we can do

God can do better. I mean so why does God waste all this time and all this effort inviting us to pray to him? Why does God stoop so to involve us in his plan? And again I believe it has to do with who God has chosen to defeat the enemy, he has chosen us. 2

Corinthians 4 says this, it says: *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. What God is saying is that you have been given the light of the knowledge of glory of God in the face of Christ and you've been given it to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not you. And you've been given that by virtue of your weakness.*

See I've often described our lives as being the nexus. It's the connection in that proxy war that's being played out between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. You have to understand, Satan cursed all of creation through Adam's fall. And in response Jesus took on flesh and he became one of us to become the second Adam in order to reverse that curse. And then he went to the cross and he gave his life and he exchanged his righteousness for our sin and by his resurrection he is leading us

to take the kingdom back from the one who stole it and we do that by prayer. You've got to understand, Satan detests us not just because we are God's image bearers but also because Satan knows that his ultimate defeat is going to come not only through Jesus Christ's hands -- this is the amazing part -- through ours as well. And when you consider Satan's ultimate defeat came at the hands of Jesus Christ who was God become what? Man. Human. God tells us that our role in this battle is going to be accomplished as he says: *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.* So God stoops to conquer primarily through prayer. And again I go back to this whole idea about Satan. Why didn't God just take Satan out the first time he rebelled? Why did God become one of us, live out this spotless life and die the death we all deserved to die instead of just judging Satan's sin instantly, I mean, wouldn't that have solved the problem? Well it would have solved a problem but not God's problem. God's problem is us. God says it so crystally clearly in *John 3:16*: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* God says you're the crown of my creation. The you're the object of my love. God has made us temporarily a little lower than the angels. What he tells us is it's just temporary. He says in *1 Corinthians 6:3*: *Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?*

So we who are going to judge angels in the next life are to engage them in this one and we do it through prayer. And God chooses to defeat the kingdom of darkness by engaging his image bearers on the front line of that war between the kingdoms. You know God could have defeated Satan instantly but instead he chooses to defeat Satan through the agency of human beings and there's a reason why. Jesus told Paul his strength was made perfect, Jesus' strength was made perfect through his weakness. God has chosen his weapon. It's you and it's me. It's the church of Jesus Christ. And he's very blunt about telling us this is war, and guess what? You're part of it. He says: *For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh.* And like it or not God has tied this kingdom into our prayer. That's why God also says in *James 5: The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* You know we saw Elijah prove that on Mt. Carmel and God constantly shows us that in scripture. And I've mentioned this before, it's incredible to see the literal picture of the power of prayer that God gives us during Israel's first battle. You know it was a sneak attack on their rear flank by the Amalekites who were the offspring of Esau and bitter foes then, I've mentioned this a couple weeks ago about how through the ages they have been bitter foes of the kingdom of Israel. They are the forebearers of the present Arab world. Exodus describes this battle, and this is what it says. It says: *And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose us some men and go out, fight*

with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, one on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

Do you see the picture that God is pointing here? It is so vivid. I mean uplifted hands is the universal symbol of prayer. And as the hands are uplifted, victory is at hand and when the hands begin to drop, defeat is at hand. But notice who grows weary. It's not the warriors, it's not the archers, it's not the charioteers, it's not the swordsmen who grow weary, it's Moses. It's the prayer warrior. In fact it's Aaron and Hur who have to come alongside Moses and physically lift up his hands. God is giving us this amazing picture. He wants us to know that Israel's survival as a nation was a function of its corporate prayer. I mean I think it's safe to say that we're never going to know this side of heaven how crucial our prayers are to all of the churches that are under attack today. You know Moses grew physically exhausted. And we

grow mentally and spiritually exhausted because basically we don't understand the cause and so we doubt our effect.

Statement three says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." That's because God stoops to conquer and we are the agency that he stoops to conquer through. And finally there's the fourth statement: "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." Now the whole IDOP statement really is an answer to that question that I raised in the very beginning of this message and the question why? Why should I do this? Well, let's just review the bidding and see if we understand where our heads, our hearts, and our hands are as regards to prayer.

Again, just to start, just to review, to quote IDOP, they said, "We believe prayer changes things." This is really the head part. And we saw this past week how the power of prayer can transform a murderous attack into a powerful testimony of how the presence of Christ can lead us through even the most remarkable of unspeakable tragedies. So yes, we believe that prayer changes things. Second, "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." Again, most folks think prayer's just -- it's just another form of magic. Magic that obviously doesn't work if people in the church itself are going to be slaughtered. But they don't realize that the greatest answer to

prayer is the presence of Christ himself received through his Holy Spirit and that presence is beyond mysterious to those who are outside. It's something they choose either to mock or deride because they can't possibly understand it. And Pastor Pomeroy speaking just days after he's lost his entire congregation demonstrates exactly what this mystery is all about. Third: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." This is the heart part. Again, like Moses, we lift up our hands in prayer and the kingdom advances; we grow weary or disheartened and the enemy advances. And fourth: "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." And obviously this is the hand and the feet part. And that last sentence really says it all. It says, "The most that we can do is also the least we can do." And I've mentioned this before. There's two great categories of sins that we Christians deal with. There are sins of commission, those are things that we do that we know we should not do. But there's also sins of omission which are things that we don't do that we are supposed to do. And I've mentioned it before, we evangelicals are very big on the former and very small on the latter. You know by and large we don't curse or steal or lie or cheat or lust that much, and if we do, we know that it's sinful. But I think we seldom think that God holds us accountable for things that we just forget to do or things that we just -- we're

not into. Just don't want to do it. Prayer is one of those things. *James 4:17* sums up God's opinion of the sins of omission. He says: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* *1 Samuel* echoes that. He says: *Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you.* See, God has made it crystal clear what his expectations are concerning those who are being persecuted for Christ's sake and what our responsibility is toward them. He says in *Hebrews 13:3*: *"Remember the prisoners as if chained with them -- those who are mistreated -- since you yourselves are in the body also."* God's referring to those who are persecuted for the gospel's sake and he gives a very simple one-word command. He simply says, "remember." Now I've said this before, I said picture yourself, you've died, you've gone to heaven, you're now standing before the bema seat judgment, that's the judgment of your good works, not the judgment that's going to send you to hell, you've already had your sins paid for by Christ, but this is where you get your rewards. And God says to you, I placed you in the wealthiest country on earth. I placed you in the safest country on earth. I placed you in a place where you would never have to worry about whether you'd ever get enough food to eat or a roof over your head. I placed you in a place where you would never have to worry about getting yanked out of your house in the middle of the night and sent off to prison for proclaiming my name. And this one thing I

asked of you: *"Remember the prisoners as if chained with them."*

Now imagine if God asked you, "Can you tell me the name of a single prisoner that you chose to remember? Can you show me that you cared enough to remember just one of them?" Well my answer would be Saeed Abedini in Iran, Gao Zhisheng in China, Asia Bibi in Pakistan. There are countless others. I mean, every Wednesday night we meet for corporate prayer and we pray through the Voice of the Martyrs prayer calendar for the week. We seek God's intervention for persecuted Christians all over the world. And, you know, Voice of the Martyrs is really a good news bad news deal. The good news is that that organization that now makes it so incredibly simple and easy to pray for and care for our persecuted brothers and sisters that much of the heavy lifting is already done for us. The bad news is that we really have absolutely no excuse for refusing to remember our brothers and sisters. James says: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* Now you might say, well, isn't that being legalistic? That's not grace, I mean, that's law. I'm only doing what James 4 says to do. I know for me the good that is necessary is to tell you what God's expectations of us are. For me to neglect to do that would be sin, according to James. We're not talking about the difference between grace and law. We're really talking about the difference between grace and disgrace. I mean you might have noticed something in that proclamation that I read this morning.

It called for prayer not just for persecuted Christians, it also said this: "We encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it." I confess for many, many years we were among those who ignored it. There was just too much other stuff going on. And God showed us that we obviously needed to prioritize our stuff. And I believe a great many Christians don't really have a heart for prayer because they don't really get it. I mean they wonder why a sovereign God needs the input of puny human beings. They don't realize the incredible privilege and the awesome responsibility that God has laid at our feet. And I understand that because for many years I didn't get it but I get it now, heart, hands, and feet I get it. But I also suggest this, now is the time for all of us to get it. The world's never going to understand the power of prayer for the persecuted church. My question for all of us this morning is also my challenge and that is: Do we?

Let us conclude by praying as IDOP has suggested. Let us pray to encourage and empower Christians to fulfill the Great Commission in areas of the world where they are persecuted for their involvement in propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ. To give relief to the families of Christian martyrs in these areas of the world. To equip local Christians to win to Christ those persecutors who are opposed to the gospel in countries where believers are actively

persecuted for their Christian witness. To undertake projects of encouragement, helping believers rebuild their lives and Christian witness in countries that have formerly suffered Communist oppression. To emphasize the fellowship of all believers by informing the world of atrocities committed against Christians and by remembering their courage and their faith. Lord, give us the grace, the strength, and your Holy Spirit's power to do just that, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.