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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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IDOP Sunday 2016

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father God, we just again thank you for your grace, we thank you that you are the great God in heaven and that you have sent your Son here on earth to give us the ability to understand who you are and to have the hope of eternity. Father, I just want to pray today as this day is dedicated to those around the world whose ability to meet and to offer worship to you is so severely compromised by persecution and we want to pray this morning as we again open up your word that you would again impress upon us the absolute necessity of our support for our brothers and sisters around the world, our support in prayer and our support in concern and our support in all of the things that you would have us do. And as we unfold that this morning, Lord, I pray your presence of your Holy Spirit, that you would guide us into truth and again to make it of permanent value. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, this Sunday is IDOP Sunday, actually last Sunday was IDOP Sunday nationally but we have communion on that first Sunday of the month, and so we're celebrating, if you want to call it that, this

day. And IDOP stands for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And IDOP Sunday is really about two very distinct and critical issues that the church is called to and one is prayer and the other one is the persecuted church, and this is the Sunday where we attempt to put both of them 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. And this morning I want to revisit the teaching I normally give on IDOP each year and essentially what I do is I give a yearly report of our commitment to the persecuted church, kind of updated from where we are today and pursuant to that, I also want to give kind of a state of the church, our church opinion on how we are doing so far today. So bear with me if you've heard this before.

And let me start out by restating the official IDOP pronouncement. This is what they say. "The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church 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."

We need a day like today because essentially we are easily

distracted from this task. There's two aspects to it. There's the persecuted church who desperately needs our prayer and there's 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. *Gospel for Asia* said this: "Americans who have not experienced persecution do not fully understand what it means to have their lives threatened, homes destroyed, rights violated and loved ones imprisoned, all because of embracing faith in Jesus Christ."

This morning I want to address the same question I addressed a year ago and it's the heart question that I address every time at this time because it goes to the heart of what IDOP is looking for from you and me and that is prayer. And it's a question that I am sure lingers in most of our minds when it comes to this kind of prayer and the question is really very basic, it's why should I? I mean to put this cynically, we at Grace, you know we put an enormous amount of stock in the sovereignty of God and we believe that God controls every single molecule in this universe including the lives of saints and of their persecutors. And so we believe that God is not walking around heaven biting his nails hoping things will work out. It begs the question if God is truly sovereign, then why does he need us? I mean why does he need us to pray for someone on the other side of the world? I've said before, why can't we just say

that one part of the Lord's prayer that covers it all, why can't we just say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" and be done with it? I mean after all, it is his kingdom and we all believe ultimately it is his will, so how can we imagine that a sovereign God is somehow stopped in his tracks by my failure to pray? Well, he's not. Well then why does he still insist that we pray? Well, allow me some possibilities to suggest. The first one goes back to what I might seem to have been harping on lately and that's this concept that we are at war. That what are in the middle of a proxy war between two great kingdoms, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. And that we bear the very image of God. We are the ones that Satan caused to fall by tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Would it not follow that God's primary weapon against that same kingdom of darkness would be us, would be the very ones that were dragged into that darkness by Satan through the fall of Adam and Eve. I mean think about this for a second, if God is all powerful, if God is omnipotent, well he certainly could have destroyed Satan and the kingdom of darkness on his own by himself. I mean after all, Satan was created by God. Well what if God in his wisdom elected to destroy Satan and his kingdom of darkness by redeeming and then employing the very image bearers that Satan had successfully corrupted?

1 Peter tells us that we're a chosen race, he tells us that we are

a royal priesthood, he tells us that we have been called out of that very same darkness into his marvelous light. And *Ephesians 6:12* tells us: *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, you know, this is something that you and I have never really gone toe to toe, mano a mano with a fallen angel, but the angels do, and they do so on a regular basis. And so I want to propose a what if. And the what if is what if the angels in heaven have to wait to hear from us before they act? I mean it's not without a similar situation here on earth. If you remember when Hurricane Katrina struck, one of the biggest complaints was the response by the federal government in the hours that occurred right after that destruction. Well, what had happened is all of the resources of the federal government were just sitting there in many cases waiting to be utilized and it turns out that the reasons 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 whatsoever including disaster relief without an implicit invitation. And one of the major issues that has now been fixed was states that were affected by Katrina, either they forgot to ask or they ignored that necessity. In fact *ABC News* speaking of the

aftermath of Katrina said: "There's no question the federal government plays a major real in disaster relief. But federal officials say in order to get involved, they must first be asked to do so by state officials." What if God in its wisdom has a similar arrangement? What if God demanded that all the angels in heaven have to wait to respond until they are in some way asked. I can't say with certainty that that's the way that heaven works but in the tenth chapter of Daniel there's recorded a meeting that Daniel has with an angel and he says this in *Daniel 10:11*. 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 is Daniel, praying. And there's a number of other circumstances in scripture that are identical to that. And this angel comes directly because of Daniel's prayer. What if that's the norm? If that's the norm, that would explain God's repeatedly imploring us as he does in *1 Thessalonians 5* to *pray without ceasing*; or *1 Timothy 2* it says: *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.* Or

Jesus's own words in *Luke 18* where he says: *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 God sees our prayers as absolutely critical. And the organizers of IDOP understand that. This is their official statement on prayer for the persecuted church. They say this: "We believe that prayer changes things. Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith. God invites us to present to Him our requests and to pray without ceasing. Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray."

This morning as I've done in the other years, I just want to unpack that statement line by line to get a better understanding of what they're saying. And I want to start off with the very first statement: "We believe that prayer changes things." And let me give you an example. It's one I think many of us are very familiar with, and it's Pastor Abedini. As most of you know, he was an American citizen who was in Iran, he was helping out at an orphanage, he got yanked off a bus, he was given a sham trial and thrown into prison. So we prayed for this man and we prayed for him literally for years. But it seemed the more that we prayed for him, the worse things got. He was tasered, he was beaten, he was isolated and then the prime minister tried to use him as a

bargaining chip to get Iranian prisoners released. And we wonder why in the world would we pray in this way. And the more we prayed, the more we started to realize that as we were praying, God was changing the way we were praying. We discovered books like Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of God* and he gave us the insight into how to pray for persecuted Christians that we never had 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." Well we learned that if that's where our prayer begins and ends, then it was a total failure. I mean the more we prayed, the more Pastor Abedini's life got worse and worse. But here's what Ripken has to say about what the persecuted really want in prayer, and here's what we learned. He goes on to say: "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 -- "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." And they've interviewed over 800 people. "Rather, believers in persecution ask us to pray that they would be faithful and obedient

through their persecution and suffering." That's a radically different prayer than the prayers that we started out offering. We wanted him out of there. God changed our prayer from understanding that it's not about ending persecution but giving people the power to go through it. When Saeed Abedini was imprisoned in Evin Prison which is a notorious bad place, he sent his wife a letter that confirms what Ripken had said about persecuted believers. There was no request that the persecution would end. Rather there was this type of acknowledgment. This is quoting Pastor Abedini, he says: "I forgave the prison doctor who did not listen to me and did not give me the medication that I needed. I forgave the interrogator who beat me. Every day when I would see the interrogator and for the last time when I saw him, I forgave him. I smiled at him and with respect shook his hand and said my goodbye. The minute I forgave them and loved them, that second I was filled with unspeakable joy."

Now I just want you to put yourself for a second in that prison. Imagine you are incarcerated in that prison and you've been a citizen of the United States. You've lived in the Midwest. And yet in the midst of that hideous prison we find him saying that he was "filled with unspeakable joy." We ask ourselves where does that come from? God alone gives the grace and the power for that and he does that in response to prayer. I mean, our church and

countless other churches have been praying intensely for Pastor Abedini only to find out he was moved from a really bad prison to one that was much, much worse. So does prayer really change things? Well, before we were able to answer that question, we had to rid ourselves of our preconceived notions about what "change" really is. I mean for me that meant we're supposed to pray and Saeed's supposed to get out of prison. But what if God's idea of change as a result of prayer is far different from ours? We prayed for Saeed's release from prison and the result was a transfer to a far worse prison, but we now know that one of the reasons why he was transferred from his previous prison is probably the reason why he was released in the first place. Saeed's wife Naghmeh revealed that 30 prisoners at Evin Prison had come to Christ. Now just consider for a minute the miraculous nature of these conversions. Take a step back and say, okay, we have an American citizen from Boise, Idaho, he's in the bowels of one of the foulest prisons on earth and there he leads 30 Muslims to Christ. We know for a fact that 30 people have learned that there's only one way to be right with God and it's not the five pillars of Islam. They learned something through Pastor Abedini that was absolutely unthinkable to a Muslim mindset. They learned that God himself would become a man and that he would live his life perfectly on this earth and that after living his life as a perfect sacrifice, he would offer that sacrifice up on a cross for sin. These men learned in one of the

darkest places on this entire planet that while they were still sinners, Christ had died for them. And it's because Pastor Abedini had been so effective that he was sent to a far worse place. And we learn from scripture that our task was to imagine the horror of the place that he was in rather than demand he be released. That's radically different. You see, we are called to put ourselves physically in his shoes trying to imagine the fear, the anxiety and the despair that would have to haunt a place such as he was in. But God calls us to such an exercise because we're connected to Pastor Abedini through the body of Christ, and God wants us to care as much about his fate as we would care about any other part of our own bodies. *Hebrews 13* says: *Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.* See we were called to pray that he would have the grace, the strength and the supernatural power to withstand that prison, to channel the light of Christ into an even more intense place of darkness and then to trust God for his eventual release. And most of you know he has since be released, and this is what he attributes his release to. This is an interview that he recently had with *Christianity Today*. He said this, he said: "In my letter to President Obama thanking him, I wrote that the waves are leading the surfer. The waves are the churches, and the surfer is the President. We forget that we can lead the surfer with the waves we create. And this wave is

revival. As you know, the media said the U.S. government or Obama didn't want to get involved in this case. But when the wave was starting because of the unity of prayer, because the church was moving, because the whole Christian world was moving, they created a wave and that led the President. We are people who can lead our President and lead our leaders in a way that God wants. Sometimes we forget our power. We're just focusing on the head to move; we need to remember that the legs actually move the head." And the leg work he speaks of is prayer. And speaking of prayer, we also need to continue praying about the struggles that he has had with his wife since his release. It has not been a pretty picture. It's been one of extreme difficulty but he is our brother in the faith. And may I suggest to you that as recently as a few years ago we didn't even know how we should be praying for saints. And we've been praying this way for a few years now and as we have prayed, God has enlarged our vision of just what it means to be praying for those who are in prison.

So we can affirm the first statement: "We do believe that prayer changes things." And the second statement says: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." And again to repeat what I said the last time, it's been said that all answered prayer begins and it ends in the throne room of God. What I mean by that is that when we pray, we are really part of a complex process that God uses

to move things on earth. When God wants to move a mountain, he doesn't just move the mountain, he starts moving people to start to pray that that mountain would be moved and then he responds to that prayer by moving the mountain. I said prayer is like the inner workings of a cell, it's far more complex, it's far more wonderful than it appears on the surface, and I described the whole process as an electric circuit. You know, the current flows from the throne room of God through us and then it flows back to the Father for an answer. And you know I did a whole sermon series on this, so forgive me trying to boil it down to just a couple of observations. But this is the way I see the mechanics of prayer. There's a whole bunch of different parts that are involved in it. First the Father is the one who initiates it. *Philippians 2:13* says: *For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.* So we acknowledge that God the Father is the source of everything that we do including what we pray for. So it's God working in us that moves us to pray in the first place. Secondly, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes for us. *Romans 8:26* 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.* I want you to think about that for a second because what God is

saying here is that our role in this process is so crucial, is so important that God's Holy Spirit comes down and comes alongside us and he guides us, understanding that we don't do this the way we're supposed to, we don't know how to do it. And so the Spirit of God works with us and alongside us to empower and translate our efforts. And thirdly, we participate. *Ephesians 6:18* says we are to be -- quote -- *praying at all times in the spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints.* And then fourthly, Jesus advocates. Jesus speaks our prayers into heaven on our behalf. *1 John 2:1* says: *My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous.* And finally the Father answers, he responds. *2 Thessalonians* says: *To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.* And then God reveals why it is we pray. He says: *So that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.* You see, it's all about us glorifying God and God starts this process and it goes through us and then it ends with him. And what is amazing about this process, it can be described as a circuit involving the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and they're all surrounding this effort of prayer. And

right in the middle of that circuit is this switch. And the switch is made up of human beings. The Father initiates, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes, we participate, we're the switches, Jesus advocates and then the Father answers. And for God's own glory, he has decided for some reason to run that entire switch through human beings. And like any other switch, a circuit that doesn't work causes the whole circuit to short out and fail. That's us when we refuse to pray.

The prophet Samuel gives us a hint of how important prayer is when he says this in *1 Samuel 12:23*, he says: "*Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you.*" I mean 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 when we sin by refusing to pray, he simply raises up somebody else to do that in our place. And so the second IDOP statement is so true, exactly what happens in prayer is a mystery. We don't really understand. It's a mystery of faith and much of it is still mysterious and the great mystery is that God would make us such a critical part of his work here on earth.

Statement three is this: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." Well now, again, why would

he do that? Do you see why -- why would God do that? Well, for some reason God stoops to conquer. I mean there's no question that anything that we can do God can do not just better but infinitely better. So why does God waste all the time and effort inviting us to pray to him? Why does God stoop to invite us into his plan? And again it has to do with who God has chosen to defeat the enemy. He has chosen us. *2 Corinthians 4* 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 the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.* What God's saying is we've been given the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and we've been given it to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. I've often described our lives as we are the nexus, we are the connection in that proxy war that we see being played out between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. And the reason why is because, you know, Satan cursed all of creation through Adam's fall. And Jesus took on flesh, he became one of us, became the second Adam to reverse that curse and by his resurrection he is now leading us as we take back the kingdom. And we take it back from Satan through prayer. And understand something, Satan detests us. And he detests us not

just because we are God's image bearers but also because Satan knows that his ultimate defeat would come not just through Jesus Christ's hands but through our hands as well. I mean after all, Satan's ultimate defeat came at the hands of Jesus Christ who was God become man. And God tells us that our role in this battle is going to be accomplished according to Zechariah: *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.*

So God stoops to conquer through us and he stoops primarily through prayer and one thing we seldom consider is the patience God has to exercise in using us this way. Just consider for a moment God's creative power. We just recently discovered that there are two billion more galaxies than we thought that there were. Galaxies are not planets, galaxies are collections of stars that include millions themselves and there's billions more of those. God spoke those into being. God made the earth and every single star that we see in less than a week and yet we have God's own account that he waited years and years while Noah is putting together his ark. I mean if God can speak galaxies into being, he could certainly have spoken Noah's ark in a nano second into being, but he didn't. We say why in the world would God who is so incredibly able to create, why would he sit there and wait and wait and wait? Because God clearly thought far more of Noah's input than he did of efficiency because God never chooses on the basis of ease or efficiency. And

again, consider Satan himself. Why didn't God just take Satan out at the very beginning the very first time that 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 it wouldn't solve God's problem because God's problem is us. We're the crown of his creation. God has made us temporarily a little bit lower than the angels but that's just temporary and he tells us in *1 Corinthians 6:3*: "*Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?*" And we who are going to judge angels in the very next life, we are to engage them in this one through prayer. And God chooses to defeat the kingdom of darkness by engaging his image bearers on the final front line of that war between the kingdoms. God could have defeated Satan instantly but instead he chose to defeat Satan through the agency of human beings. And you know why? Well, we get a hint in Jesus's discussion with Paul. Jesus tells Paul that his strength is made perfect through our weakness. What he's saying is that his strength is brought to completion by our weakness and what God is saying is I've chosen a weapon, it's you. We are my weapon, the church of Jesus Christ. And he's quite blunt about telling us this is war, and you are part of it. *2 Corinthians 10:3*: *For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh.* And like

it or not, God has tied his kingdom into our prayer. Which is why God says in *James 5:16*: *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* I mean, that's just what Elijah proved on Mt. Carmel. It's what God is constantly showing us in scripture.

And in scripture God even gives us a literal picture of the power of prayer. It was during Israel's very first battle. If you recall, it was a sneak attack on their rear flank. It was an attack by the Amalekites who were the offspring of Esau. They were bitter foes then, they're bitter foes today. They're forebearers of the present day Arab world which still bitterly hates the Jews. And Exodus describes this battle in *Exodus 17*, it says this: *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, and the other 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 painting here? I mean, uplifted hands is the universal symbol of prayer. And when the hands are uplifted in prayer, victory is at hand; when the hands begin to drop, defeat is at hand. But you notice that it's not the warriors in this scenario who are growing exhausted, it's not the archers, it's not the swordsmen who are growing weary. Who's growing weary? It's Moses. It's the prayer warrior. You know in fact it was Aaron and Hur who had to come alongside Moses and lifted up his hands and we have in this an amazing picture. What God is trying to get Israel to see is that its very survival as a nation was a function of its corporate prayer. I mean I think it's safe to say that we'll never know this side of heaven how crucial our prayers are to all the churches that are under attack today. Moses grew physically exhausted. And we grow mentally and spiritually exhausted because we don't understand the cause, so we doubt the effect.

Do you doubt how important the human connection is to God? I think we all do. Let me give you another example. In Acts 10 we have the story of Peter and Cornelius. This is a firsthand account of the power of prayer. We have Cornelius who's a devout and a righteous man and he's seeking God in prayer and he's not even a Jew, he's a hated Roman soldier, but he's crying out to God constantly, and *Acts 10* says this: *There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the*

Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God." How's that for answers to prayer? And listen to what God does. God then tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to get a guy named Peter. I mean he even gives Cornelius directions to where Peter is staying. He says to him in Acts 10:32: Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. So here we have God literally giving street directions to Cornelius as to how to find this guy Peter. And we find out that at the same time God is speaking to Peter. The Holy Spirit in a rooftop vision tells him to go meet with Cornelius. This is Acts 10:19. It says: While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them." Now all of this begs a very important question. And that is why is God going to all of this trouble? Why is he giving out two different sets of directions? Why is God sending Peter to answer Cornelius' prayer instead of just answering himself? You know why? It all goes back to that circuit of prayer that I spoke about at the beginning. God

sent Peter to Cornelius because he wanted a human being in the center of that circuit. I mean in Acts 10 God is literally pulling Peter and he's pulling Cornelius and he's pulling them together. I mean he gives Cornelius a Google map and then he sends Peter a vision. He says -- again, this is Acts 10, he says: *While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them."* Think about it. This is a meeting that's arranged by God. In verse 21 it says: *Then Peter went down to the men who had been sent to him from Cornelius, and said, "Yes, I am he whom you seek. For what reason have you come?" And they said, "Cornelius, the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you."* All of this is so they could hear words from Peter. Again, I read this and say why in the world didn't God just tell Cornelius himself? I mean, just boom it out from heaven, say, hey, what do you need to know? Cornelius is seeking God, he's praying, and God's response is, "Wonderful prayer, Cornelius, let me get you a human." That's what God is saying. *"Let me divinely instruct a holy angel to summon Peter for you."* Again the question is why? And the answer is we're in the middle of a proxy war. We're in the middle of that war and we are God's weapon.

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 through. And finally there's the fourth statement. It says: "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." Well, the whole IDOP statement is an answer to the question of prayer that I raised at the beginning of the message, and the question was: Why should I? So let's just review the bidding to see if we understand where our hearts, our hands and our heads are with regard to this. Again to quote IDOP, they say first: "We believe that prayer changes things." That's the head part. Our knowledge of who we must be praying for and our understanding of how we are to be praying, well they've all changed, they've all changed as a direct result of prayer. Pastor Abedini's ministry and his very life are being held up and empowered by that prayer, so yes we can say that prayer does indeed change things. Secondly, "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." We know that God gives us this immense privilege of being part of the circuit that connects heaven to earth through us. I mean it's a sacred privilege but it's also a sacred responsibility. Thirdly, "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." This is the heart part. You know like Moses, we lift up our hands in prayer and the kingdom advances. When we grow weary or disheartened, the kingdom doesn't

advance and the enemy advances. And fourthly, "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 hands part, the feet part. And this last sentence really says it all: "The most we can do is also the least we can do."

You know there are two great categories of sins that we as Christians deal with, those are sins of commission, those are things that we do that we ought not to do but there are also things of omission, those are things that we don't do that we are supposed to do. We evangelicals are very big on the former and not so big on the latter. You know, we by and large don't curse, steal, lie, cheat or lust much, and if we do, we know that that is sinful, we know that it's wrong. But I think that we seldom think that God will hold us accountable for things that we simply forgot to do or things that we just don't feel like doing, and 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.*" And *1 Samuel 12* narrows it down to prayerlessness, it 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 again there's not just prayer but there's remembering. It 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 and really what it comes down to is what he's giving us is a very simple one-word command. The word is "remember." You know and I've repeated this awful picture that I have in mind and the picture is I'm standing before God and he's judging my life and he points out some very obvious things. He says, you know, I placed you in the wealthiest country in the world, in the safest country on earth in a place where you never have to worry about whether or not you have enough food to eat or a roof over your head. And I placed you in a place where you'd never have to worry about being yanked out of your house in the middle of the night and sent off to prison for proclaiming my name. But this much I asked of you: Remember the prisoners as if chained with them. I imagine this, I said, imagine if God then asked you can you tell me the name of a single prisoner that you've chosen to remember? Can you show me that you cared enough to remember even one of them? Well, our answer would be Saeed Abedini in Iran, Gao Zhisheng in China, Asia Bibi in Pakistan, and there are countless others. Every Wednesday night 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 there's good news and there's bad news in this. The good news is that there's organizations like Voice of

the Martyrs who make it easy for us to do that. They make it incredibly easy to pray for and care for our persecuted brothers and sisters so much that the heavy lifting is basically done for us. They also make it easy for us to write our brothers and sisters in whatever language is native to them. You can also sign petitions demanding their release, and all of this is good news. The bad news is that we really have absolutely no excuse for refusing to remember our brothers and sisters. *Therefore to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* You might say, well, that's -- that's legalistic, isn't it? I mean, that's not grace, that's law. But here's the rub. I'm only doing what James 4 is telling me to do. I know that for me the good that is necessary is to tell you what God's expectation of us is, and if I neglect to do that, for me it is sin. So actually we're not really talking about a choice between grace and law, we're talking about a choice between grace and disgrace.

Did you notice something in that proclamation I read this morning? It called for prayer not just for persecuted Christians; this is what it also said. It said: "We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it." For many years I had to count my name among those who ignored it. I mean just too much other stuff going on. Maybe we need to prioritize our stuff. You see, a great many

Christians really don't have a heart for prayer because they really don't get it. They just wonder why would a sovereign God need the input of puny human beings? They don't realize the incredible privilege and awesome responsibility that God has laid at our feet, and I understand that because for many years I didn't get it. I get it now, head, heart and hands, I get it. Now is the time for all of us to get it as well. I mean you know the world is never going to understand the power of prayer for the persecuted church and my question this morning for us is also my challenge, and that is do we? Let me conclude with their prayer.

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 Communistic oppression. To emphasize the fellowship of all believers by informing the world of atrocities committed against Christians and by remembering their courage and faith. We pray these things through Jesus Christ. Amen.