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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

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IDOP Sunday

Selected Scriptures

Prayer: *Father, I just again, I thank you, I praise you, I praise you for the fact that we can sit here in freedom and raise up our concerns for our brothers and sisters around the world who do not have that freedom. And so Father, this morning as we again look into exactly what IDOP is all about, I pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit, I pray that you would guide us as we look into the issue of prayer itself, that you accompany us and that you would again make this of permanent value, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well this Sunday is IDOP Sunday and IDOP stands for International Day of prayer for the Persecuted Church. IDOP Sunday is about two very distinct and critical items that the church is called to: One is prayer and the other is the persecuted church. This is the Sunday where we put both of those together. It is the day given to turn our attention to prayer for those willing to pay the price of publicly acknowledging Christ. And so this morning I just want to revisit the teaching on IDOP that I give basically every year.

Essentially it's a yearly report of our commitment to the persecuted church and it's just kind of updated for this year.

And so pursuant to that I want to give a state of the church opinion also on how we are doing so far today, so bear with me if you've heard this all before. But first let me restate what the official IDOP pronouncement is. This is exactly what they say: "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."

We need a day like today. We need one because we are easily distracted from this task. There's the persecuted church who desperately needs our prayer and then 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. So this morning I want to start out by addressing the same question that I addressed a year ago, it's the one that constantly lingers, and the question is: Why should I? I mean to put this cynically, we at Grace, we put enormous stock in the sovereignty of

God. We believe that God controls every single molecule in this universe and that includes the lives of the saints and their persecutors. I mean if we believe God is not walking around heaven biting his nails, just hoping that things will work out, then it begs the question, I mean, 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 he just say, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," and be done with it? I mean it is his kingdom and ultimately it is his will being done. So how can we imagine a sovereign God somehow being stopped in his tracks by my failure to pray? Well, the good news he's not. Well, then why does he insist that we pray? Well allow me to suggest some possibilities.

The first one goes back to what I might seem to be harping on because I speak about it all the time and it's this idea that we right here, right now, are at war. We are right in the middle of a proxy war between two great kingdoms, there's the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and we have a role to play in that war and our role in that war is as bearers of God's image. We are the only creatures in all of creation who are given that task; and because of that, we are specifically targeted by God's enemy, Satan. We are the ones that Satan caused to fall by tempting Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. So would it not follow that one of

God's primary weapons against that same kingdom of darkness would be us, the very ones dragged into that darkness by Satan through the fall of Adam and Eve.

I mean think about this just, just for a second. I mean God, God's omnipotent, God is all-powerful. 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 chose a unique way of dealing with Satan? 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? What if he employed them as spiritual foot soldiers in an actual conflict? I mean *Ephesians 6:12* tells us flat out, it says we are at war. This is 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 with a fallen angel but angels can and do engage the enemy on a regular basis.

Well there's a "what if" here, and here's the "what if." What if the angels in heaven have to wait to hear first from humans before they act? What if God's kingdom had rules similar to ours? You

know, we just had a hurricane a couple of weeks ago back in Florida, a nasty, terrible hurricane but our federal government was there actually to help out and it made a huge difference. We actually saw a picture of President Biden and Ron DeSantis shaking hands. That's an amazing thing. What a contrast that was to Hurricane Katrina. I mean one of the biggest complaints about that hurricane 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 just sitting there waiting to be utilized. And it turns out that 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 an implicit invitation. And one of the major issues that that's now thankfully been fixed, that the states were affected by was if you forgot to ask or if you didn't ask, you wouldn't get that aid. ABC News speaking of the aftermath of Katrina said -- quote -- "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."

What if God in his wisdom has a similar arrangement? What if God demanded that all the angels in heaven had to wait to respond until

they were asked by humans? It's not as far-fetched as it seems. I mean I certainly cannot say with certainty that that's the way heaven works but in the tenth chapter of Daniel there's recorded a meeting that Daniel has with an angel, and listen to what that angel says. This is Daniel 10:11. The angel 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."*

Well here's an angel himself describing an action he's taken that's directly the result of a human being -- that's Daniel -- praying. I mean the angel came directly because of Daniel's prayer. What if that was the norm? Well, if that was the norm, that would explain God imploring us constantly. In *1 Thessalonians* he says: *Pray without ceasing.* In *1 Timothy* he says: *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people.* Or Jesus' own words in *Luke 18*. He says: *And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*

I think one thing there's no doubt of and that is that God sees our

prayers as absolutely critical, and the organizers of IDOP understand it. This is their official statement on prayer for the persecuted church. Actually it's five statements but this is what they say. They say: "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." And so this morning once again I want to unpack that statement line by line.

The first statement is, "We believe that prayer changes things." You got to know that is a very tough sell today. After the Parkland shooting in Florida it seemed like the very idea of prayer had reached its lowest ebb. You know, the very idea of sending up prayers for a tragedy like Parkland became an excuse in the eyes of many for people just being willing to doing nothing to change the status quo. This is what CNN said. He said -- quote -- Semantic satiation is the phenomenon in which a word or phrase is repeated so often it loses its meaning. But it also becomes something ridiculous, a jumble of letters that feels alien on the tongue and reads like gibberish on paper. 'Thoughts and prayers' has reached that full semantic satiation. For the last few years, after every mass shooting, the term immediately trends on social platforms. It's not a good kind of trending: Among the earnest pleas for

social and legislative action, the aftermath of each successive shooting inspires more and more memes and cynical jokes. In one highly-shared image that circulated after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting in February, 'Thoughts and Prayers' is imprinted on the side of a garbage truck. Another meme shows an empty van. 'Excellent news,' it reads. 'The first truckload of your thoughts and prayers has just arrived.'"

You see, the popular notion about prayer is that it's a waste of time compared to actually doing something physically. There's a part of that statement that I agree with. I mean if politicians are simply using the empty rhetoric of false prayers as an excuse for inaction, they're engaging in conduct that the scripture itself decries. *James 2:17* says: *So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.* We know God expects both. I mean if prayer is nothing but an excuse for inaction, then the people would have a point. But in this case many people have pure scorn for those who turn to God when things turn awful.

There's a reason why so many folks are upset and scornful about prayer is because they really have no idea what prayer is about, and that itself begs the question. I mean, what do these folks who are so upset about praying think prayer is for? And what is their measure of effective prayer? I think most people equate prayer

with magic. They figure out, well, the magic's not working, it's time to abandon it. You see, the problem isn't with prayer and its effectiveness, it's what the idea of what prayer itself is supposed to accomplish. I mean many of the folks who make their sentiments known think prayer's a way of kind of bending God's will to mine. They have it perfectly backwards. Prayer is God's way of bending my will to his, and that primarily is about lining my will up with the kingdom of God.

You know it's been said that the kingdom of God is basically a freight train and it's going, it's chugging on, moving from eternity past through the present to eternity future and the final conclusion of all things and you know there's three things that you can do with a freight train. You can oppose it, you can ignore it, or you can get on board. Oppose it in one way or another long term or short term, it's going to flatten you. Just ask Mao Tse-tung or Joseph Stalin or Pol Pot or any other atheist leader who thought he was going to conquer the world and destroy God's kingdom on earth. They're all now dead and buried along with each of their fallen kingdoms that have been consigned to the ash heap of history.

Well, you can ignore it. Many people do. They just kind of let the kingdom pass by and live their lives more or less like any of the other animal kingdom, thinking that life itself consists only

of eating, sleeping and reproducing. They don't bother God and they sure hope that God doesn't bother them, but they're mistaken. This is what God says in *Philippians 3*. He says: *For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.* See, you can oppose the kingdom or simply let it pass you by by setting your mind on earthly things or, 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 spirit and your bodies with the kingdom and its goals.

You see, the reason why people see prayer as so completely ineffective is because they have reduced prayer to magic. You know God's the master magician. Church is that actual physical place where the magic takes place, that's where the magic has its greatest strength. And according to these folks if your prayers go unanswered, it really just means that prayer doesn't work. But that's not at all what prayer is about. You see, if I pray as God would have us pray, then 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 involves the miraculous, I mean scripture is filled with instances where people have prayed and miracles have happened

because God can and does miraculously intervene in the lives of his children. But more often than not the miracle of prayer is that God gives something much more valuable than health or wealth or safety and what he gives is his presence. That power and that presence changes everything. It's what saints, it gives the saints the ability to handle anything that this world can throw at them.

You see, the promise of Christ is never you do A, B, C and D and you're going to get a healthy life, a wealthy life, an easy life or a successful life. What he does promise though is no matter what life hands you, I'll walk you through it and I'll walk with you. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Why? Why? For you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

You see, God promises that he will accompany us in a way that only the people who have been through it can know. Then there are those who are outside the immediate circumstances not having received that grace and they'll either marvel at the strength that they see or they'll mock it because they just see it as a false and a farce, and I know that because I've been there myself. I've also received that grace. And I've said it over and over again, you don't get boiling oil grace until you're in boiling oil. And that's what the persecuted saints understand, that God's presence will sustain and

empower you through anything that this life can throw at you.

And we discovered how that works in books like Nik Ripken's *The Insanity of God*. That book gave us an insight into how to pray for the persecuted church in a way I've never seen before. This is from Ripken's book. This is what he 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 here's what Ripken has to say about what the persecuted really, really want in our prayer. He says -- quote -- "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."

This is a guy who interviewed eight hundred people who suffered the most incredible persecution all around. He went to Russia, he went to the Middle East, he went to Asia, he went all over, and eight hundred people being interviewed, they never, ever heard a request

that the persecution would stop. He says, "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, and it tells us something critical about the value of God's presence. You see, when God gives those suffering persecution the gift of his presence, they find it so precious, so incredibly valuable, that even the persecution seems worth it. I mean Ripken's book details people undergoing horrific persecution and insisting it's a small price to pay for what we've been given, an intense connection to God's Holy Spirit. And that testimony alone is proof positive that prayer changes things.

So does prayer actually change things? Well, the actual answer is yes and no. Is it a means of changing virtually everything about me, whether it be physical, mental, spiritual, psychological or social to line my life up with where the kingdom is going? Yup, yup. Is it magic that will enable you to somehow manipulate God to do the things that you want him to do? Nope. So yes, we can affirm the first statement -- quote -- "We believe that prayer changes things."

The second statement says, "Exactly what happens is a mystery of

faith." Well to repeat what I said the last time, it's been said all answered prayer begins and ends in the throne room of God. You see, when we pray we are really part of a complex process that God uses to move things on earth. You know, when God wants to move a mountain, he doesn't just move the mountain, the first thing he does is he moves some of us to pray that the mountain would be moved and then in answer to that prayer he moves the mountain. You see ultimately God is behind everything that we do including our prayer. Paul says so in *Philippians 2*. He says: *For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.* So prayer starts with God at work in us.

Oftentimes on Wednesday night when we gather for corporate prayer we spend a few moments just kind of asking God to speak through us, to use the moment to prompt us to give voice to the prayer that he's asking us to give voice to. We recognize how important that role is, that somehow our voices raised in prayer is crucial to the kingdom. In fact it's so crucial that God's Holy Spirit has to intercede in order to make prayer happen. Listen to how God puts this 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. Just kind of absorb that for a second, think about what's being said here. What's being said is that our role in prayer is so critical that the Holy Spirit of God comes alongside us to guide us. God says that the spirit recognizes that we are weak and basically that we pretty much stink at this. Now we don't do prayer as we ought, is what he said. He goes on to say that the God who searches heart already knows the mind of the spirit and that the Holy Spirit's job, at least one of his jobs is to intercede for us according to God's will. It's like the spirit takes the earth bound sin crusted efforts of human beings and he shapes them and he polishes them and then he presents them to God the Father for a response.

So the Spirit of God works in us and with us to empower and translate our efforts. If you stop to think about how much effort God puts into our prayer, how much patience he has, I mean, I can only imagine it's a ridiculously tedious and overwhelmingly inefficient way to utilize creatures whose attention spans can be measured mostly in seconds, barely in minutes, who frequently forget, who frequently pray for the wrong things and with the wrong motives and probably spend half the time devoted to prayer just daydreaming or wandering around in a fog. I know. Been there done that many, many times. And yet God sends his Holy Spirit to help us in that particular weakness.

The only logical reason 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 that we have in prayer is. The prophet Samuel gave us a hint of how important prayer is when he said this in *1 Samuel 12*. He said: *"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. Because God's sovereign purpose is never thwarted when we sin by refusing to pray, he simply raises up another to take our place because that human aspect of prayer is that critical. So prayer is indeed a mystery but one that human beings play a critical part in. So we say the second part of that IDOP statement is absolutely true: "Exactly what happens in prayer is 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 on this earth.

Well statement three says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." Now can you guess why? Well, to put it simply it's because God stoops to conquer. Is there any question that anything that we can do God can do better? I mean so why does God waste all that time and effort inviting us to pray to him? I mean why does God stoop to involve us in his plan? Again, it has to do with who God has chosen to defeat the

enemy; he's chosen us. I've often described our lives as the nexus, it's the connection in a proxy war that we see being played out between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. You know, Satan cursed all of creation through Adam's fall, and Jesus took on flesh and became one of us to become the second Adam to reverse the curse by paying the sin debt of his sheep, and by his resurrection he's leading us as we take back the kingdom from Satan, and we do it through prayer.

You have to understand Satan detests us. Not just because we're God's image bearers but because Satan knows that his ultimate defeat will come not just through Jesus Christ's stance but through ours as well. I mean, after all when you think about it Satan's ultimate defeat came at the hands of Jesus Christ who was God become man. And God not only became one of us but he also enlisted us as combatants in this battle. And God tells us that our role in this battle is going to be accomplished -- quote -- *"not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD of hosts.*

So God stoops to conquer through us primarily through our prayer, and the thing that we seldom acknowledge is the patience that God has to exercise in using us this way. Last time I talked about Canis Majoris. It was recently discovered. The name Canis Majoris is a star, it's a star that's 2.9 billion times bigger than our

sun. Just to kind of wrap your mind around that, almost three billion times the size of our sun. It was spoken into existence by God in less than a week. I mean we have recently discovered that there are two billion more galaxies than we thought -- not stars, but galaxies, each of which contain millions of stars. There's two billion more of those than we thought there was. God made the earth and all of the stars as well in less than a week. And yet by God's account he waited years and years and years while Noah is building an ark. If God can subpoena Canis Majoris into being almost instantly, how quickly do you think he could have made Noah's ark? But he didn't. Instead he chose to wait while Noah built it stick by stick by stick. Clearly God thought more of the importance of Noah's input than he did about his own efficiency because God never chooses on the basis of ease or efficiency.

And again, we look at Satan himself and we ask, why didn't God just take Satan out the very first time he rebelled? Why did God himself become one of us, live out a spotless life and then die the death we all deserved to die instead of just judging Satan's crime instantly? Wouldn't that have just solve the problem? Well it would have solved a problem but not God's problem. You see, God's problem is us. All of God's creatures from the insects through fish, reptiles, birds and mammals, they all act according to a prescribed role that they've had since creation, with one great

exception. One creature, one creature listened to the temptation of the serpent and decided to commit treason against his creator. But that rebellious creature was also the very crown of God's creation. And God is committed to working through us as the highest level of creative being. God says he has made us temporarily lower than the angels. But he insists that's just temporary. He tells us in *1 Corinthians 6:13*: "*Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?*" So we who will judge angels in the next life, we 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.

We know God could have destroyed Satan instantly but instead he chose to defeat Satan through the agency of human beings. And we know why. I mean, Jesus told Paul Jesus's strength was made perfect through our weakness, because God has chosen as his weapon you and me and that is the church of Jesus Christ. And he's quite blunt about telling us this is war and you are 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 his kingdom into our prayer. That's why God also says: *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*

That's what God is showing us constantly in scripture. In fact God even gave us a literal picture of the power of prayer. It happened during Israel's very first battle. It was a sneak attack on the rear flank by the Amalekites and the rear flank is where the cowards go, that's where the women and the children and all the sickly are, at the very end. And the Amalekites decided that's where we're going to attack. The Amalekites were the offspring of Esau. They were bitter foes then, they are bitter foes even today. They are forebearer of the present day Arab world which still obviously bitterly hates the Jews. But there's a description of this battle in the book of Exodus. 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.*

You see the picture that God is painting here? I mean, uplifted

hands is the universal symbol of prayer. And when hands are uplifted in prayer, victory is at hand; when the hands begin to droop, defeat is at hand. But you notice something, it's not the warriors who are getting exhausted, it's not the archers, it's not the charioteers, it's not the swordsmen who are growing weary, it's Moses! It's the prayer warrior! In fact it is Aaron and Hur who had to come alongside and lift his hands up physically. And what an amazing picture! God wanted Israel to know that its very survival as a nation was a function of its corporate prayer. I think it's safe to say we will never know this side of heaven how crucial our prayers are to all the churches that are under attack today. Moses grew physically exhausted, we grow mentally and spiritually exhausted because we don't understand the cause, so we doubt the effect.

Now if you doubt how important this human connection is to God, let me give you another example from scripture. This is in Acts 10. In Acts 10 we have the story of Peter and Cornelius. This is a firsthand account of the power of prayer. Cornelius, if you never heard of him, he was a devout and righteous man, he sought God in prayer, he was a centurion, he was a member of the military class hated by everybody, certainly the Jews, but he was a righteous man. This is *Acts 10:1-4*. It says: *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 an answer? How would you like to be praying that prayer and all of a sudden -- boom! right in front of you there's an angel. So God tells Cornelius next to send men to the town of Joppa to get Peter, the apostle Peter. He even gives Cornelius directions to where Peter's staying. In Acts 10:32, it says: "*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.*" I mean it's the equivalent of him saying go down there, make a left on State Street, tell you how to get there. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit in a rooftop vision to Peter is telling him that he's going to have a meeting with Cornelius.

And so all of this begs a very important question. The question is: Why go to all of this trouble? I mean why did God send Peter to answer Cornelius's prayer instead of just answering it himself? You know why. God sent Peter to Cornelius because he wanted a

human connection in this circuit of prayer. In Acts 10 God is literally pulling both Peter and Cornelius together. 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."* Just think of this, this is a meeting that's being set up not by a secretary, not by an intermediary but by God himself. Verse 21 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."*

And again it begs the question, why didn't God just tell Cornelius himself? You know Cornelius is seeking God, you know what God says, God says, wonderful prayer, Cornelius! Let me get you a human. He says, *"Let me get you a divine -- let me divinely instruct a holy angel to summon Peter for you."* And again the question is why and again the answer is three-fold. We're in the middle of a proxy war. God stoops to conquer and we are the agency that he stoops to conquer through. Statement three says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." And that's because God stoops to conquer. We are the

agency he stoops through.

And finally there's a fourth statement. He says, "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do-pray." You know, the whole IDOP statement is an answer to the question of prayer that I raised at the beginning of this message. The question I raised at the beginning was why should I?

Let's review the bidding to see if we understand where our hearts and our head and our hands are according to this. Again to quote IDOP, they say: "We believe that prayer changes things." This is the head part, inside our heads. What kind of evidence do we have of that? Well, we've seen Gao Zhisheng get released from a Chinese prison, we've seen Saeed Abedini get released from an Iranian prison, we've seen Asia Bibi get released from a Pakistani prison. We prayed specifically and often for these very people. If you remember Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh were the two women that were in prison in Evin Prison in Iran that we prayed for in 2015. Just yesterday I watched a podcast with both of them describing their miraculous release from that prison. They've written a book *Captive in Iran*, again, answers to prayer. And these are people that we as a church committed to prayer. So is there any doubt that prayer changed these things?

Second, "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." This is kind of the hard part, the interior part. Again we said most folks think of prayer as magic. They don't realize that the greatest answer of prayer is the presence of Christ himself given to us through his Holy Spirit and that presence is beyond mysterious to those outside the faith. It's something they choose either to mock or deride because they don't understand it. The testimony of those caught up in that persecution proves that these folks look at us as the ones who come up short. We look at the persecuted church, we think, oh, those poor people. They have persecution, imprisonment and sometimes torture with Christ right there beside them. And we've got safety and comfort and Wal-Mart and Netflix and we're starving for the presence of Christ. Who has the better deal? See, the mystery of faith is that the persecuted church is actually the blessed church.

Third, "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." Again, another hard part. Again like Moses we lift up our hands in prayer and the kingdom advances. We grow weary or disheartened, 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." And obviously this is the practical part, the hands and feet part. And

that last sentence really says it all: "The most we can do is the least we can do." You know there's two great categories of sins that we as Christians deal with. You've probably all heard, they're sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission, those are things that we do that we ought not to do; and then there are sins of omission, things that we don't do that we are supposed to do. Well we evangelicals, we're very big on the former but we're not very big on the latter. Generally we don't curse, steal, lie, cheat or lust 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 simply forget to do or for things that we don't feel like doing, and prayer is one of those things. *James 4:17* sums up God's opinion of sins of omission. It says: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* *1 Samuel* narrows it down to prayerlessness. He says: *"Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you."*

So God has made it crystal clear what his expectations are concerning those who are being persecuted for Christ's sake and he says it very clearly in *Hebrews 13:3*. He says: *"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. He gives a very simple one-word

command, he says, "remember." And here's the challenge that I give each year at this time. I say picture yourself standing before God's bema seat judgment to receive your rewards that God is giving you for your life, and he points out some very obvious things. He says, I placed you in the wealthiest country on earth. I placed you in the safest country on earth, in a place where you'd never ever have to worry about whether you'd get enough to eat or a roof over your head. 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 simply for proclaiming my name, but this much I asked of you: Remember the prisoners as if chained with them.

Well, imagine if God then asked you, can you name me the name of a single prisoner that you chose to remember? Can you show me that you cared enough to remember just one? Well, our answer would be Saeed Abedini in Iran or Gao Zhisheng in China or Asia Bibi in Pakistan or Maryam Rostampour or Marziyeh Amirizadeh. Then there's Leah Sharibu, kidnapped and still being held by Boko Haram, been two years now, and there's countless others.

See, every Wednesday night we pray through the Voice of the Martyrs prayer calendar for the week. We ask God's intervention for persecuted Christians all over the world. And we recognize there's

good news and there's bad news in this and the good news is that organizations like Voice of the Martyrs, they now make 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.

One thing that's helpful is I subscribe to an email service called "I commit to pray" and each week they send me three current prayer requests for persecuted brethren and all they ask for is a commitment to pray for them. Whenever I see it in my in box I just stop and I read it and I pray for those three people. What keeps me at it is the realization that even that microscopic level of commitment is something that the enemy tries to stifle and stop. The phone will ring, another article will grab my attention, something comes up. But then I remember God's word which says: *"Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin."* Now you might say that sounds awful legalistic, that's not grace, that's law. Here's the rub. I'm only doing what James is telling me to do. I know for me the good that is necessary is to tell all of you what God's expectation of all of us is. If I neglect to do that, for me it's sin. Actually according to IDOP it's not really a choice between grace and law, according to them it's a choice between grace and disgrace.

The proclamation I read this morning called for prayer but not just for persecuted Christians. This is what it said, if you remember, it said: "We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it."

So IDOP identifies three different levels of opposition to God's plan. There's oppressors, there's persecutors and there's ignorers, folks who just didn't have the time or the energy or the inclination to pray for the persecuted church. For many years most of us were ignorers, I mean, we were. There was just so much other stuff going on, but we need to prioritize our stuff. A great many Christians don't really have a heart for prayer because they don't really get it. They wonder why a sovereign God needs the input of puny human beings and 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. The world is never going to understand the power of prayer for the persecuted church, and my question this morning is also my challenge and that is simply two words: Do we?

Let me conclude by giving you their prayer for the persecuted church. They say: 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 faith. Amen.

Okay. Folks, let's pray. *Lord, I just again, I thank you for the brothers and sisters we have throughout the entire world who are undergoing unspeakable tortures and are standing up to those tortures because they have that incredible gift of your presence. I just continue to pray that each and every one of us would feel the burden to remember a Gao Zhisheng or a Saeed Abedini or a Maryam Rostampour or any of the others, Lord, I just continue to pray that you would put on our hearts the incredible privilege that we have of praying for the persecuted church. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*