

**Pastor Tom Mortenson**

**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**November 8, 2015**

**IDOP Sunday**

**Selected Scriptures**

**Prayer:** *Father, we just want to thank you once again for your grace, I thank you for your goodness, I thank you for the fact that today especially stands in contrast to the rest of the world that we are here gathered with no fear whatsoever in a place where we can openly praise and thank you. And Father today is IDOP Sunday, this is International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church and Father, we want to direct our thoughts and our prayers towards our brothers and sisters around the world right now who don't have the privilege that we have, who are meeting in fields or in hidden places who are fearing for their lives. Father, we just continue to lift them up, give them grace, strength, peace, power and wisdom, we pray. Give us the ability this day to direct our hearts and our minds towards them. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, as I said, this is IDOP Sunday. Actually last week was, this whole month, any time in the month of November that you celebrate it is the day that you do and we are doing it today. It's about two very distinct and very critical issues that the church is

called to, and one is prayer, and the other is the persecuted church. This is the Sunday where we put both of those together. It's the day that is given to turn our attention to pray -- to pray for those who have been willing to pay the price of their loyalty to Jesus Christ. And this morning, I would like to revisit the teaching on IDOP that I give each year and if it sounds familiar because it's essentially what I spoke about exactly a year ago, just kind of update it for where we are today. There's just too much important material and there's too much to spend an extraordinary amount of time and attention on to move on to something else at this time, and pursuant to that I want to give sort of a state of the church's opinion as to how we are doing so far today. So bear with me if you've heard it all before.

Let me first just restate the official IDOP pronouncement. It is 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. IDOP began in 1996 through the efforts of the World Evangelical Fellowship in cooperation with a variety of denominations and faith-based organizations. From a core group of

approximately 7,000 churches, the IDOP has grown to be the largest prayer day event of its kind in the world. The IDOP is a rallying point for Christians and others is to stand behind those who suffer for their faith by providing prayer support and appropriate advocacy.

You know, we need a day like today because we are easily distracted from this task, and last time I asked what -- or I mentioned, I pointed out why it is so critical to get our heads, our hearts and our hands into the idea that the persecuted church needs our passionate commitment. First it was our heads, and I started out asking a question last year, and I said, "Is your head in the game?" You know, this may seem like a strange question at first but having had lots of kids who were into sports and hearing that statement a lot, I've heard it spoken, "Is your head in the game?" You know that's kind of a less than polite way for a coach to say, "Do you really care about the game that's going on all around you?" And let me give you an example, I mean, if any of you follow football at all or the Giants, last week the Giants scored a season high 49 points, an extraordinarily amazing offensive display. Unfortunately their opponent scored 52. They suffered their worst defensive performance in years and neither the coaches nor the players could even begin to figure out how such skilled players could just utterly collapse, but it was obvious, their heads just

were not in the game. And if they didn't care enough about the game, then all the talent that they had, it wouldn't matter. If they weren't mentally prepared to compete, if they didn't put in the effort to focus their minds on their particular task at hand, then it wouldn't matter how skilled they were, their efforts were going to fail. Well, when it comes to the persecuted church it's crucial that we have our heads in the game because the stakes are infinitely higher on both sides of the issue. There's the persecuted church who desperately needs our prayer and then there's us who desperately need to pray. And in order to do that, we first need to get our heads into the game. And the game is praying for the persecuted church.

Gospel for Asia says this, says: "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." Well this morning again, I want to address the question I addressed a year ago. It's the heart question that I address each year at this time and it goes to the heart of what IDOP is looking for from you and me and that is prayer. And there's a question that I think that lingers inside the minds of most of us when it comes to this type of prayer and the big question is, quite frankly is: Why should I? I mean, why should I bother? I mean to put it

cynically, we at Grace put an enormous stock into the sovereignty of God. I mean, we believe that God controls every single molecule in this universe including the lives of the saints and their persecutors. So we believe that God is not walking around heaven biting his nails just hoping that things are going to work out and so it begs the question, and the question is this: If God truly is sovereign, why does he need someone like us to pray for somebody on the other side of the world? I mean, why can't we just say that one part of the Lord's prayer that covers all of it, why can't we simply say, "Hey God, your kingdom come, your will be done"? Why don't we just say that and be done with it? I mean after all, it is his kingdom and ultimately it is his will that will be done. So how can we imagine a sovereign God is somehow stopped in his tracks by my failure to pray. Well, the obvious answer is he's not, but he still insists that we pray. Well, I'd like to give the organizers of IDOP a chance to address that issue. This is their official statement on why prayer for the persecuted church is so critical, they say this, they make four statements. 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.

Well this morning I'd like to first revisit the heart part of this message by unpacking this statement line by line. The very first statement is: We believe that prayer changes things. All right. Let me start off with one example. We have been praying for Saeed Abedini for a number of years now. I mean every one of us in this church knows who Saeed is. If you don't know, Pastor Saeed is someone who is an American citizen who was yanked off a bus, he was there in Iran helping to establish an orphanage, he was yanked off a bus, given a sham trial and thrown into prison. And we've been praying for him now literally for years. Well, you could make the argument that since we've been praying for Pastor Abedini, things have gotten much, much worse. He's been tasered, he's been isolated, he's been beaten many, many times and now the prime minister is trying to use him as a pawn, as a bargaining chip trying to get the release of other Iranian prisoners in the United States trying to affect that by using Pastor Saeed. So how do we pray for Pastor Abedini? Well, I think one of the things that has happened as we as a church have been praying is that we've been able to be exposed to more resources to help us get our heads into the game, and one of those resources is Nik Ripken's book *The Insanity of God*. It's a book that came about from Ripken's interviews with over 800 persecuted Christians. And so he got an awful lot of information from the inside of how these people react, how these people think, what their needs really are. 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 the persecutors be punished." Well, you know, if that's where our prayer begins and ends -- we've been doing that. If that's where our prayer begins and ends, I'd be the first one to admit it's been a total failure. It hasn't worked. Pastor Abedini's lot has only gotten worse the more we have prayed. But here's what Ripken has to say about the persecuted and what they really want in prayer. He says this: "We seem to forget that Jesus himself promised that the world would reject and mistreat his faithful followers just as it has rejected him. 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.'" That's a radically different prayer. And I think that the reason for that, you know when Saeed was imprisoned at Evin Prison which is a notoriously terrible place, he sent his wife Naghmeh a letter that confirms what Ripken has been saying all along with persecuted believers. In this letter there was no request that the persecution would end, rather there was

this type of acknowledgment. This is a quote from Saeed to his wife. He says: "I forgave the prison doctor who did not listen to me and did not give me the medication 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 want you to put yourself into Saeed's place. Just imagine that you are incarcerated in that prison and you are a citizen, you're from the midwest, you're from the United States and you're in the midst of an incredibly hideous prison, and yet he says he finds himself filled with an unspeakable joy. It's God alone who 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 that he was moved from a bad prison to one that was much, much worse.

So does prayer really change things? Well, before we answer that question, we have to first rid ourselves of our preconceived notions about what change really is, and that means the change that we want versus the change perhaps that God wants. I know for me, the change was somehow that Saeed would get out of prison. But

what if God's idea of change as a result of prayer is far different than ours? I mean, many have been praying for Saeed's release from prison and as a result he got transferred to a far worse prison. But now we know one of the reasons why that happened. Saeed's wife Naghmeh has revealed that 30 prisoners at Evin Prison had come to Christ. I mean that was a while ago, we don't even know now by this point how many others have come to know Christ. So just consider for a minute the miraculous nature of those conversions. We have an American from Boise, Idaho who's in the bowels of one of the foulest prisons in Iran and in that prison he leads 30 Iranian Muslims to Christ. I mean 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. We know they've learned something through Pastor Abedini that was absolutely unthinkable to a Muslim mindset and that they've learned that God himself would become a man, that he would live out his life perfectly on this earth and then he would offer up that life for us, for our sinful lives on the cross. They've learned the gospel. And these men learned that in one of the darkest places on the planet. And in that prison they learned that while they were still sinners, Jesus Christ had died for them. And it's because Pastor Abedini has been so effective that he's been taken out of that place and put somewhere else. Well, that victory doesn't change his circumstances, his circumstances are still awful. We've also learned from scripture

that our task is to imagine the horror of the place that he's in. And we are called to put ourselves physically into his shoes, trying to imagine the fear, the anxiety, and the despair that would have to haunt a place like that. Well, God calls us to such an exercise because we are connected to Pastor Abedini, and we're connected to him through the body of Christ and God wants us to care as much about his fate as we would care about every single part of our own bodies. *Hebrews 13:3* 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.* So we as a body are called to pray that we have -- and that he has the grace, the strength, and the supernatural power to withstand that prison and to channel the light of Christ into that particular place of darkness. Well, I would suggest to you that as recently as a few years ago we didn't even know how we were supposed to be praying for persecuted saints. So we've been praying this way for a few years now, and as we've prayed, God has enlarged our vision of just what it is we are pray for. So I think we can affirm that first statement: We believe that prayer changes things.

Now the second thing says this, the second statement is: Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith. So let's take a moment to look at this mystery as it were. To repeat what I had said last time, it has been said that all answered prayer begins and ends in the

throne room of God. And I've made the point that when we pray, we are really part of a very complex process that God uses to move things on earth. You see, when God wants to move a mountain, he doesn't just move a mountain. First he starts to move people to pray that that mountain would be moved. Then in response to that prayer he moves the mountain. 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 sort of an electrical circuit. You have current that flows first from the throne room of God, then it flows through us then back to the Father for answer to prayer. I did a whole sermon series on this, and forgive me for trying to boil it down to just a few statements, but here's an observation of the mechanics of prayer and who does what. Simply stated, the Father initiates, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes, we participate, Jesus advocates, and then the Father answers. Let me just peel that back a little bit and explain how that works.

The very first thing that happens is the Father initiates.

*Philippians 2:13* says: *For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure.* So God is the source of everything within us. Our wills, our desires, our hearts, our minds, that's what starts us on the process of prayer. It is God working in us to move us first to pray in the first place.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit translates. The Holy Spirit translates and intercedes for us. *Romans 8:26* says this: *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 just want you to think about this for a second. What God is saying here is that our role in prayer is so crucial, so desperately necessary, that the Holy Spirit considers it his job to come alongside us to guide us understanding that we don't know what we're doing, understanding that we don't do prayer as we should. The Spirit of God works with us as we're praying to empower and translate our efforts. Thirdly, we participate. *Ephesians 6:18* tells us that we are to be *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 fourthly, Jesus advocates, that is Jesus is in heaven speaking on our behalf, he's our lawyer as it were, he speaks for us. *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.* So Christ is advocating on our behalf as we pray. And then finally the Father answers. *2 Thessalonians 1*, it 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. So God's going to answer our prayers and then he says why? He reveals why in the very next verse, 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.* And what is amazing in this entire process is that it can be described as a circuit involving Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and right in the middle of that circuit is the switch and the switch is made up of human beings. See, the Father initiates, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes, we participate because we are the switches, Jesus advocates and then the Father responds. The Father answers for his own glory, and for his own glory he has elected to run that circuit through human beings. And like any other circuit, a switch that doesn't cooperate will cause the whole circuit to short out and fail. That's us when we refuse to pray. You know, the prophet Samuel gives us a hint of how important prayer is when he says this in *1 Samuel 12:23*. He says this: *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 may 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 another to take our place. Now this second statement in the IDOP is so true: Exactly what happens in prayer is a mystery. It is a mystery of faith. And much of it is

still mysterious. But the great mystery is that God would make us such a critical part of his work on earth.

Statement three says this, it says: God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing. And again, given what we've just learned, you see why, you see why because God stoops to conquer. I mean there's no question that anything that we can do, obviously God who is infinitely powerful, anything we do he can do better. And so it begs the question why in the world would God waste all this time and effort inviting us to pray to him? I mean why does God stoop to involve us in his plan? Well, it has to do with who God has chosen to defeat the enemy. He's very clear about that, he's chosen us. *2 Corinthians 4* says this: *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.* Hear what God is saying here. What he'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 not to us but to God. You know, I've often described our lives as we are the nexus, that is to say we are this premiere, premiere

connection in a proxy war that we see being played out between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And the reason why that happened is because Satan cursed all of creation through Adam's fall and Jesus took on flesh, he became one of us, he became the second Adam in order to reverse that curse. And by his resurrection he affirmed his victory. And then he through us are taking back the kingdom from Satan through prayer. I mean you have to understand, Satan detests us. He detests us not just because we're God's image bearers but he also knows that his ultimate defeat would come not just through Jesus Christ's hands but through ours as well. I mean after all, Satan's ultimate defeat came at the hands of Jesus Christ who was God made man, and God tells us that our role in this battle is going to be accomplished according to *Zechariah 4:6: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.* So God is telling us I stoop to conquer, and I stoop to conquer through you primarily through prayer.

Last week we were looking at the glory of God in creation and I spoke about *Canis Majoris*, there's this amazing star 2.9 billion times bigger than our sun and it was spoken into existence by God. I pointed out that God made all that we see, all of creation in less than a week and yet we have in the Genesis account God waiting patiently years and years and years for an assignment that he gave to one of us, Noah, for an assignment to build an ark to be

completed. See, one of God's attributes, thank goodness, is patience. If God could speak *Canis Majoris* into being, he could certainly have spoken Noah's ark into being in a nanosecond, but he didn't. Instead he chose to patiently wait while Noah built it. Clearly God thought a lot more of the importance of Noah's input than he did about mere efficiency. But you know God never chooses on the basis of ease or efficiency. Consider Satan himself, we ask the question -- I ask the question why didn't God just take Satan out when he rebelled? Why didn't God just say, "You're done"? Why did God himself become one of us, live out this perfect life and die the death we each deserve to die instead of just judging Satan's sin instantly? Wouldn't that have solved the problem? Well, it would have solved a problem but not God's problem. God's problem is us. We are the crown of his creation. God made us temporarily a little lower than the angels but that is just temporary. 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 will judge angels in the next life are to engage them in this life through prayer. Like I said, we are engaged in this proxy war between two superpowers, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and God chooses to defeat the kingdom of darkness by engaging his image bearers on the front line of what is literally a war. God could have defeated Satan instantly, I mean, he created him. Instead he chose to defeat Satan through the

agency of human beings and you know why? God says that his strength is made perfect, it's completed through our weakness. What God is saying is I have a weapon, I've chosen that weapon -- it's you. You are my weapon, the church of Jesus Christ. He's quite blunt about telling us this is war and you're part of it.

*2 Corinthians 10:3: For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. Ephesians 6:12: 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.* Like it or not, God has tied his kingdom into our prayer. That's why prayer is so crucial to God. He says in *1 Thessalonians 5: Pray without ceasing. Philipians 4: Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. Colossians 4:2: Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving. James 5:16: The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* And those of us who have read what Elijah did on Mt. Carmel know exactly what God is talking about. It's what God is showing us constantly in scripture.

In fact God even gave us a literal picture of the power of prayer. In the Old Testament it was during Israel's first major battle. It

was a sneak attack on their flank by the Amalekites. The Amalekites were the offspring of Esau, they were bitter foes then, they're bitter foes today. These are the forebearers of the Arab world and they still bitterly hate the Jews. Exodus describes this very first battle. This is *Exodus 17*, it says: *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. This is not just a battle, this is a picture. God is giving us a very physical picture and what he is saying is uplifted hands, it's the universal symbol of prayer and when the hands are uplifted in prayer, victory is at hand. And when the hands start growing heavy and the hands start to sink, defeat is now at hand. But notice who we're talking about. What happens here is it's not the warriors who are growing defeated and 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 Aaron and Hur have to literally come up and prop up his hands holding up his arms and giving us this picture. And it's an amazing picture. God wants Israel to know that its very survival as a nation was a function of its corporate prayer. I mean 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 and we doubt our effect. I mean do you doubt how important humans are in this whole series, this whole idea that God has produced, of his interactions between heaven and earth, of the role that we have?

Let me give you another example. This is Acts 10. 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 righteous man, a Gentile no less, he's not even a Jew. He's a soldier. He's somebody who's passionate about his relationship with God and he's working through understanding who God is more and more. *Acts 10* describes him this way, 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 to prayer? How would you like to have an angel come and say, "You know, those prayers you just prayed, all of us up in heaven saw it, we saw it coming up as a memorial before God." So then God tells Cornelius to send a group of men to Joppa to go get this fellow Peter, and he even gives Cornelius directions to where Peter is staying. He says to him in Acts 10:32: *Send therefore for Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.* God's literally giving street directions to Cornelius as to where to get to Peter, and at the same time God is also speaking to Peter. We have the Holy Spirit in a rooftop vision to Peter, he's telling him that he's going to 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."* Understand, Peter's never met with Gentiles before, he would never do this, but God is directing him. He's pulling those two people together.

And all this raises a very important question and the question is why is God going to all of this trouble? I mean, why did God send

Peter to answer Cornelius's prayer instead of just answering it himself? I think it goes back to the circuit of prayer. The circuit that I spoke about at the beginning. You see, God sent Peter to Cornelius because he wanted a human connection. You know, in Acts 10 God is literally pulling both Peter and Cornelius together. I mean, he's giving Cornelius a Google map and he's giving Peter a vision. Again let me just repeat what it says. 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."* I just want you to think about what's taking place here. This is a meeting specifically arranged by the Holy Spirit of God. Let's continue. 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."*

So all of this trouble has a point. It's so they could hear words from Peter. Of course the question is why didn't God just tell Cornelius himself? You know, Cornelius is desperately seeking God, God says, wonderful prayer, Cornelius, let me get you a

human. That's what God's doing. He says let me "divinely instruct a holy angel to summon Peter for you." That's a direct quote. The question is why? And the answer is we're in the middle of a proxy war. We're in the middle of a battle between two different kingdoms and we're right in the middle. 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.

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. Well, the whole IDOP statement is an answer to the question of prayer that I raised at the very start of this message. Remember the question? The question was: Why should I? Well, let's just review the bidding and see if we understand where our heads, our hearts, and our hands belong here. Again just to start off again quoting IDOP: "We believe that prayer changes things." This is the head part. Our knowledge of who we must be praying for and our understanding of how we must be praying have all changed and grown directly over these last few years as the result of prayer. Pastor Abedini's ministry and his very life are being held up and empowered by that prayer. So yes, I can say that without a doubt, prayer changes things. Secondly they say: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." Well, God

gives us this immense privilege of being part of the circuit that connects heaven to earth through us. It's a sacred responsibility and a sacred privilege. Thirdly: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." This is the heart part. We saw in Moses as we lift up our hands in prayer, the kingdom advances. And when we grow weary, when we get sick of it, we say what's the point, the enemy advances. And fourthly it says: "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." Obviously this is the hands and the feet part. The last sentence says it all, it says: "The most we can do is the least we can do."

You know, there really are two great categories of sins that we Christians deal with. There's the sins of commission which are things that we do that we're not supposed to do and then there are sins of omission, things that we don't do that we are supposed to do. Well, Evangelicals are very big on the former and very small on the latter. That is to say we don't much curse, steal, lie or cheat or lust and if we do, we are very aware and we know that it's a sin. But I think we seldom think that God holds us accountable for things we simply forget to do or for things we just don't feel like doing, and prayer is one of those things. *James 4:17* sums up God's opinion of 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 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.* God has made it crystally clear what his expectations are concerning those who are being persecuted for Christ's sake. *Hebrews 13 says: Remember the prisoners as if chained with them -- those who are mistreated -- since you yourselves are in the body also.* God is referring to those persecuted for the gospel and he gives a very simple one-word command. He just says: "Remember." Last time I repeated again, I said, I had this awful picture in my mind and the picture is I'm standing before God and he's judging my life and he's pointing out some very obvious things. First thing he says is you understand that 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'd never have to worry about whether or not you'd get enough food to eat or have a roof over your head. I placed you in a place where you'd 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. But this much I asked of you: Remember the prisoners as if chained with them. Now imagine if God had asked you can you tell me the name of a single prisoner who you have chosen to remember? I mean, my answer would be Saeed Abedini or Gao Zhisheng or Asia Bibi, 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. See, there's good news and there's bad news in this. The good news is that organizations like the Voice of the Martyrs 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 has already been done for us. I mean, they also make it incredibly easy to even write to people who are in prison cells. They translate our English into whatever language we need to. You can also sign petitions demanding their release, and all of this is very 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 that's awful legalistic, that's not grace, that's law. But here's the rub. I'm only doing what James 4 tells me to do. See, I know for me the good that is necessary is to tell you what God's expectations of us are and for me to neglect that is sin. And we're really not talking about the difference between grace and law, we're talking about the difference between grace and disgrace, as far as I'm concerned. I mean, if you notice the proclamation that I read this morning it has one very important little section. It called for prayer not just for persecuted Christians, it also said this: "We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution and those who ignore it." For many years I've had to

count my name among those who ignored it. Just too much other stuff going on. Well maybe 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. I mean, they wonder why a sovereign God needs 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, many years, I didn't get it. I get it now, heart, hands, and feet I get it. Now is the time for all of us to get it as well. You know, the world will never understand the power of prayer for the persecuted church, and my question this morning is also our challenge. It is: Do we?

Let me conclude with their prayer for us. It says this: *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. Lord, for  
these things we pray. Amen.*