

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

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SPEAKER

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People Of The Kingdom

PART

4

TITLE

Persevering In Truth

SCRIPTURE

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16



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Good morning to you, Providence. It's good to see you. My name's Dave, one of the pastors here, and hope you are well. If you're a guest with us, we say a special welcome to you as well. If you've joined us online, we say good morning to you. If you have your Bibles, 1 Thessalonians, chapter 2. If you don't have one, there's one under the seat, just encourage you to maybe grab that. Take that as a gift if you want to. It'd be great. And also just encourage you, Brian mentioned last week, our lead pastor here is going to be out on sabbatical this summer, and so different folks are teaching. Just want to encourage you, he will not be checking any email just to encourage him to breath for a little bit, and so if you have any complaints or criticism about what happens while he is gone, you can send that to an email at Brian@Pray.org.

Okay, so just send that to him and he'll get it in about two or three months. It'd be great. Yeah, so praise God. So, well, we have been looking at this book, 1 Thessalonians, which is simply amazing of how Paul, this man, encountered the gospel. It's in Acts chapter 9 in how he came to faith. It's an incredible story. He was persecuting Christians, and then God just radically changed his life to go into plant churches and being an incredible leader historically of just the Church moving forward. And as he made his way into Athens, what we would know as modern day Athens, the Northern cities were Philippi, and then there was a region called Macedonia, so it's sort of like a province. And then within that was Berea. And then there was a town called Thessalonica. I had the joy when I was in seminary to go and study at that city.

It's a modern day city, thriving. It's a port city where multiple people are in and out. But at this day in time, it was just it was dark. It was extremely, there was spiritual poverty everywhere. And as Paul made his way from Philippi and generally wherever he went, he usually got kicked out and so then he would go to [inaudible 00:02:54]. And as he was at Thessalonica, he preached the gospel. He just continued to share this good news of Christ. And after about three weeks, once again, beaten, and attacked and forced out. So he moves down to Berea, another town, then on down to Athens and as he was in Athens, he began to reflect on what God had done in the short period of time in Thessalonica. And some had believed, and he's just wondering, how are they doing?

How can I encourage them? And so he sends Timothy back up to just survey, see what's happening, see how they're doing. And then he makes his way onto the very tip of where Athens is there's this town city called Corinth, and he's there for some time. Timothy makes his way back, gives the report, and then Paul writes the letter. He writes the letter of 1 Thessalonians back to the Church. And is so fascinating because he writes to not correct them, but to commend them, to commend them for their faith, to exhort them. He saw some stuff happen, and then he heard from Timothy what was happening and it was incredible. And so this is what, when the gospel is preached, this is what Jesus does. He formed them, the Thessalonians, as he does us, the Providence church as a people to live as an advanced sign of his coming kingdom. The kingdom of God, in one sense has been an inaugurated.

It's started, but it's not fully arrived. We're sort of living in between this tension of the already not yet scenario. And it's fascinating because as we looked in this study and as we've started this study a few weeks back, we

see these people, they're the people of the kingdom and what they look like and how they live as they work their faith out and as they wait for the return of Christ. And so I'm excited to be able to pick it up in chapter two and we'll be looking at verse 13 in just a second. But let me pray for us and we'll dive in.

Father in heaven, thank you for this day. Thank you for the opportunity to open your word and to read it and have it read us and to get it in hopes that it gets in us. And God, would you just move today? Not to just inform us of some things, but to really grip our heart and transform our minds and cause us to be alert and awaken affections for your son to live as an advanced sign of your coming kingdom, as you will reign as you are in heaven, but on earth. So we ask for grace today. Teach, encourage, build faith, build hope. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, perseverance in prioritizing the Bible is rapidly declining. This week, as I was looking at one study showed 26% of US adults believe the Bible is the word of God. 26%. What's more alarming is 5% of US adults who would identify as a follower of Christ, read their Bible four to five times a week. Could you imagine going for two days without eating food? I wouldn't want to be around you.

You wouldn't want to be around me. Slightly grumpy, right? I was reading recently a study, it was fascinating story where Eugene Peterson, Eugene Peterson was a pastor for a number of years and then became a prophet at a seminary up in Vancouver, British Columbia. And it was interesting where he had written some stuff and there's a particular singer of a group called U2, his name is Bono. So for the millennials and the gen Zs in the room, your parents love this band and grew up on this band. And he, Bono had been influenced by Peterson's writing and he wanted to meet him. And so he reaches out to the school where he was at and to the teaching assistant for Mr. Peterson and he said, Mr. Peterson, we got a unique request. There's this band, it's pretty popular, and the lead singer would love to come and meet with you. And so his name is Bono and he left to connect. And Mr. Peterson looked at his teaching assistant and said, "Who's Bono?"

So great response from a scholar that just stays in the word, right? Anyway, so he ends up, he said, man, he wants you and your wife to come to a concert. He wants to come see you, visit you, talk through some things, but then he wants you all to come to a concert. He's like, well, I'm working on a commentary for Isaiah. It's a deadline and so I'm just not sure if I can make this particular date for the concert. And so as we get closer, let's just talk. And so as they got closer to the date for the concert, the teaching assistant that received the words about the tickets and where this particular concert was going to be and he comes to Mr. Peterson and Mr. Peterson, he says to him, he says, man, the concerts, I mean, it's coming. He's like, man, I just don't think I can do it. And he looks at Mr. Peterson, the teaching assistant, he looks at Adam and he says, "Mr. Peterson, it's Bono." And Mr. Peterson looked at his teaching assistant and said, "It's Isaiah."

He missed the concert. But later they would connect. He died, Mr. Peterson died in 2018 and went to heaven, but before he did, he and his wife made it to a concert and asked about that experience backstage, the whole nine yards, he said it was good music. It was just a little loud, but he really enjoyed it. So listen, oh, if

to prioritize the Bible and having a high view of the sufficiency and authority of the scripture, it would not only serve us well, but it would point many to the king and his kingdom that's coming. I mean, think about Philippians chapter 3. Philippians chapter 3 says, "but our citizenship is in heaven." So we, as a people of the kingdom, we walk with our feet on earth, our head in heaven, in one sense. We long for that day. We look to that day and we eagerly await, one translation says a savior, the Lord, Jesus Christ.

So our citizenship as followers of Jesus, we're a part of this kingdom living out these kingdom values. That's true and beautiful before this world that's dark and lost. And so let's read together, starting in chapter 2. If you're new to Christianity or you're exploring it, we're so grateful you're here. And just to let you know, as we look in this, if you found that place, maybe in the Bible, in the chair where there's large numbers and small numbers. And so the large numbers are the chapters and the smaller numbers are the verses, and we're just working our way through the passage. And so we're in chapter 2, you would scroll down a little bit, you'll see verse 13 and I'll pick up and we'll read there and I'll say, this is the word of God.

"And we also thank God constantly," verse 13, "for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displeased God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last."

What a text. As a people of the kingdom, this is what I want to do this morning. I want to show you three ways God's people persevere in the truth of the gospel. So three ways God's people persevere in the truth of the gospel. The first is this is that kingdom people receive God's word as the very word of God. Kingdom people receive God's word as the word of God. Notice in verse 13, Paul, he's constantly giving thanks for what God is doing. Thanksgiving to Paul was not a holiday. It was a habit of heart and he's constantly giving thanks. And he does so because they have received the word of God. Verse 13 says not as a word of men, no, but as the very word of God. 1 Peter tells us that this word came about through people much as a sailboat is moved by the wind, having nothing to do of itself to move on its own but only by that from an external force, in a sense, so it is that the spirit of God moves men along to write this word, to record this word. They were receiving it.

Now, what were they receiving? They weren't receiving necessarily Thessalonians. Thessalonians was taking place. The New Testament, a lot of these things hadn't taken place yet. Some of them had taken place. And so what were they receiving? What is known as this word of God? Well, ultimately it's the gospel, Jesus Christ, the good news about Jesus. It's this, John 1 will say in the beginning was the word and the word was God. The word was with God. And so this ultimate form of communication, which we use words be it writing or speaking or texting or whatever they are. They're words. This is the ultimate way we communicate and ulti-

mate way God communicated to us is through Christ. This divine revelation, this is a special revelation, but that divine revelation of Christ coming living here. Yes, it was some of the Old Testament texts that were had been written and that was being read and encouraged. It was that pointing to this Messiah, pointing to the one that was promised in Genesis 3:15, that there's going to be one when all chaos broke loose, that there's going to be one who comes and make things right.

He was preaching the gospel, this gospel. He comes to this port city, darkness is everywhere and they hear hope. They hear words like God made you, God created you in the beginning. And yet the propensity of our hearts have always been to rebel. We've rebelled against him. And yet there's no unrighteous act that's so far outside of the reach of the mercy of God. There's no righteous act that's so great that it can actually merit favor with God. It's through Christ alone. In him alone. And so it was through him. This is what Paul is preaching in Thessalonica.

He's preaching this good news of a man who's come and lived the life that we cannot live and died the death that we deserve and was buried and then hung on a cross, buried, and then rose from the dead three days later. This was the glorious good news of Christ. Yesterday, in the neighborhood, I was walking through and my neighbors, they're from Pakistan and we're good friends and have a great relationship. And so we're probably for multiple years now, processing Islam and Christianity. And so yesterday as he's doing yard work, and doing some walking in the neighborhood, he comes out and he sends me videos about who Muhammad is and I send him videos who Jesus is and we just had this great relationship. We fist bump. We don't fight. We fist bump. That's a fist bump.

And so we were in the front yard and he says, I've been thinking Dave, more and more, I think like Islam and Christianity, they're almost virtually the same. I'm like, tell me about that. How did you arrive at that? He goes, well, the only difference is I don't believe Jesus is the son of God or he was raised from the dead. Well, that's a pretty big difference. Fist bump. And they're really different. I go, just tell me how are you going to get to heaven? He goes, man, I am doing everything I can to be good and in the end, I hope he has mercy on me. I go, that sounds horrible to live without much. Aren't you exhausted? Aren't you tired? He's contemplating. I go, mercy has already come on a hill called Calvary where he displayed his mercy in Christ.

And it's based on his righteousness that I have hoped today that at the end of my life, I'll fly into the presence of God because of what has already happened. You can't merit this. He is so holy. We are so unholy. This is why we need a savior. Listen, this is what Paul does. This is what he did at Acts 17, right? Remember a few weeks ago, we looked at this, how he made his way into this town? And notice what Acts 17:2 says. He reasoned with them. He reasoned with them. He explained he was proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer. And why is it necessary for the very son of God, the most righteous person that's ever walked the planet to suffer a horrific death? Because the wages of sin is death. We all, that's one thing we all have in common in this room, is that we will take our last breath one day and the wages, there's different means of death but the wages of our sin is death.

But the gift of God, but God who's rich in mercy, but God who is rich in mercy has crushed his son instead of us. He died the death we deserve. He drank the wrath that's rightly do us. It was necessary that Christ would suffer and then rise. And listen, this is why I'm a Christian, not a pastor. This is why I'm a Christian because I'm a great sinner, I needed to be rescued and freed from my sin. I was in bondage and God delivered and rescued and gave me hope and it was the resurrection that made the difference in my life because I knew my sin would lead to that day and I had no hope.

When you come back from the dead, you have authority to speak the way Christ spoke. Listen, people of the kingdom, they receive it yet some people reject it. Think about Timothy. He was a pastor at the church at Ephesus in his Paul wrote in 1 Timothy, he's encouraging this young pastor. He says in 1 Timothy, he says, I want to charge and trust you, timothy, listen to really wage the good warfare. What does that mean in the Christian worldview? Hear me on this. The Christian worldview does not say fight with each other. It says to fight for others, to fight for their soul, to in kindness and humility in a winsome way, engage in dialogue. Reason with them, but be generous and gentle and patient and kind. Wage the good warfare, that's against the ideology and the cultural world views that we're navigating to try to instruct how the false sense of what they teach and the truth of the gospel.

He says, I entrust you, listen when you wage it, that by rejecting it, that the kingdom people receive it by rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith. What does that word mean, shipwreck? It's an interesting word study when you think about it's a verb that has immediate action, but then future consequences. It's like you and I flying in a plane at 30,000 feet, right? At 30,000 feet, and the plane runs out of gas. We don't feel it right away. We're just drinking our Diet Coke, watching a movie, going to the bathroom in a tube. But calamity is coming. It's not instant. No, you can do the wings and still cruise for a little bit. But calamity is coming. And when you reject Christ and his word, it's inevitable of what's coming. Listen, C.S. Lewis, former Oxford prof, 20th century with Jesus says it like this, "Christianity is a statement which, if false is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."

If it's important, you and I should eat this book. What food is to your body, this book is to your soul and mind. Eat this book. Charles Spurgeon, pastor in London late 1800s, says "A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't." Wear it out.

Get in it. It shapes your day. And look, if you're not a morning person, not always a morning person, but if you're not, fight for those times to start the day, not just in the day, start the day somehow, some way in this. We have the Bible reading plans out in the lobby, grab one. We're on the app. We have so much access. Let it be on your heart before you just read it on a coffee mug. Kingdom people receive God's word as the word of God. But notice secondly, kingdom people, they respond. They respond to God's word and watch God work. Kingdom people respond to God's word and watch God work. Notice in verse 13, he says "you accepted it not as the word of man, but as the really what it is the word of God, which is at work in you believers." This word, it's working when you receive. It moves. It molds.

It matures you to godliness. The word, the gospel, as it's found in the word of God, it saves those who are far from God. It justifies, it makes you right with God. It strengthens you. It sustains you. It is for the soul what food is for the body. He had already heard evidence of God. How God's word was changing the people in verse 9. In verse 9 he says very specifically that they're already they're turning from idols to follow and serve the living God. This is what it does. It uproots everything. It's not a bandaid. It's a new heart, where it changes you from just serving maybe once a week to becoming a servant in your life. You don't worry about titles anymore. You just are constantly looking for a towel to wash people's feet. It transforms you into this odd character of beautiful aroma.

We wonder why it's such a spiritual desert, right? We think of it as being some spiritual desert. This word is like the Evian water bottle compared to toilet water. I mean, think about the ideologies of our day. Trying to look clear just like a bottle of water from the Swiss Alps. When one leads to sickness when you drink enough of it. I mean, think about Hebrews chapter 4, where the author clearly lays out what this word does, this word of God. It's living. It's active. It's discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. What this word does as you read it, get in it and ultimately confront it with the gospel and our sinful nature and his holiness and we lean into his love, his righteous anger, and his amazing love and amazing grace, think when we get in it, it gets right all the way back.

There's a closet, maybe multiple that are in the human hearts, way back in there where only you maybe, and God know about and nobody else. But when you read this word, it's going to navigate through the soul, through the joints, all the way through the heart, all the way to the core to expose, to bring to light, not to crush you, but to heal you. This is what the gospel does. This is what God's words. He's not just waiting up there to smack you down. No, use this good news of this gospel message to get, to expose the sickness of our heart, and then to bring incredible healing and peace and joy as this gospel invades your life. It's like an MRI machine. I've spent a lot of time in these machines lately, too much time with all this knee messed up. Five surgeries.

And so when I go get an x-ray, the x-ray just showed the bone, and they're like, man, I think there's some deeper issues. I'm like, great, thanks for the encouragement. And, and he goes, so we got to put you in this machine. It's a crazy machine, right? They play a little music. You can choose your music, like that's going to really comfort me. And as you go into this, it sounds like a train. And it's this loud machine that moves, it starts turning. And it's its turning, it's imaging deep into your body the ligaments, the tendon, the cartilage, the ACL, the MCL, all of those details that the x-ray doesn't show and it's all in there and it's showing exactly what's torn. Exactly. And the only way to see that is you have to get inside that thing.

And the way your heart is healed is you get into this book. You have to go up in it and lay in it and read it and let the word do its work. He will work in you through you. Colossians 2 says that as you received him to continue to walk, and then he says, as you walk, he's going to do some things. He's going to root you, he's going to build you, and he's going to strengthen you. Trees that grow good roots have great fruit. Isaiah 55

says it like this. Listen, I love when it rains and I love when it snows, because I always think about Isaiah 55. Isaiah 55 says, says as the rain and the snow, they come down from heaven, they don't return, but they water the earth, making it bring, it's affecting it, and it's going to bring forth sprout, giving seed.

And then he says, and so shall the word that goes out from my mouth, his word, it will not return to me empty. It will accomplish that which I purpose and it shall succeed in the thing for which I sit in. The word goes out just as the rain falls and it touches the ground and grass grows and fruit grows and trees grow, so shall it be with my word. It's living. It's active. It moves into your heart. It moves into your brain. It changes your worldview, your perspective, how to live as a person of the kingdom that's coming.

It's not a bandaid for a bad day. It's a new heart. This word's like a father, mother when the child is scared at night and the storm comes, he jumps in the bed and you say it's okay, I got you. That's where the word lands on you. Well, kingdom people, they receive this word, they respond to the word and kingdom people rejoice in suffering. Number three, the last, we'll land it, kingdom people rejoice in suffering for God, knowing the gospel spreads in affliction. So the gospel spreads. You and I, no one in the world can stop this power of the gospel. When they tried to stop it, when they tried to stomp on it, it spread. The text says in verse 14, chapter 2, we just read it, he says, listen, imitators of God, you're imitating those churches in Judea that where they killed Christ and you're suffering in a similar way.

They're filling up their sin account, he says. They fill up the measure of their sin. What does that mean is they're just laying those who persecute, those who oppose, those who object, they're just laying up upon more and more and more, a day of wrath is coming. See listen, Paul says to them, when you read the scriptures, not through the lens of a Western culture, but through the lens of the actual events in the history, what happened? I mean, 11 of the 12 disciples were martyred and the last one ended up on an island.

I mean, think with me just a moment right now, what you're experiencing right at this moment. Just let's lean in together. You are sitting in a padded chair that's extremely comfortable. Some of you are drinking a latte where you ordered it on your phone and walked in, didn't have to speak to anybody and picked it up, walked back out, and you're just nursing it, trying to stay awake while I teach. Think about what you're experiencing. Music that's amplified, hands that are raised, PowerPoint that helps you understand some of the nuances of the word even. This is not normal Christianity. This right here is not normal.

This is grace upon grace upon grace. 5% of the world population lives in the US. Five. He says, you want to live a godly life in Christ, you will be persecuted, 1 Timothy, all over the world this morning. I mean, 1 Thessalonians 1, we looked at it last. He says, listen, you become imitators of us. You welcome the message in the midst of severe suffering. Imagine, just do that Q and A in your heart right now that if you heard this good news and you knew the state of sin you were in and wrath was coming and there was hope that's in the gospel, but it would cost you your job, your life, your retirement, your IRA, everything. What would you say? This is the question that majority of our brothers and sisters around the world are having to answer even

today, 360 million of them. He says, listen, you receive, you welcome the message in the midst of severe suffering with joy of the holy spirit. The spirit of God was given him a depth of joy of knowing the peace of God, even in the midst of pain. And listen, I'm sensitive this morning that there is a unique amount of suffering in this room that has nothing to do with following Jesus. I understand. I mean, we're just in a [inaudible 00:33:04] where we're going downhill, bodies are falling apart, surgeries. I get it. I've had it. Got a whole bi-ionic knee now. Just falling apart. This specifically is talking about suffering and affliction for following Jesus. I've been in doing this for 27 years, never once had the threat of being arrested for saying Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. He came, lived a life I could not live. He died the death, was buried, and raised from the dead. Everybody kind of, yeah, amen.

Majority of the people, when they say that in the world, they're saying it at a risk of being killed or arrested. Kingdom people rejoice in suffering, knowing, Jesus says, listen, think about this, here are the two idols of our hearts in the West. Those padded seats that you're sitting on right now fuel... And next week, when you come in, we're not going to have like benches and sit on the floor. Okay? Hang in there with me. But what it does is it fuels the idols of our heart. What's the idols of our heart? It's comfort and security. And so what we do in the West is we look at Christianity as this worldview where listen, Jesus says in Matthew 16, Jesus says, I'm going to build my church and the gates of hell won't prevail against it.

He says that. So what do we say? We read that text, we internalize that text, we Westernize that text as if that, Hey, listen, let's say there's a huge gate around this right here, well, I want to get inside that gate. I'm going to bring some of my Christian friends. I'm going to do a couple Bible studies. I'm going to have a coffee mug with a coffee verse. We're going to memorize one verse a week maybe, and just do a little Christian huddle that's really safe. And then the gates, we put up the gate around us so the evil ideologies and philosophies of the world can't get to us. There's a gate up. And the text is saying just the opposite. What Jesus is saying is that they're people groups in the world where the enemy has set up gates and taken them captive and bondage to ideologies and demonic warfare and it's crushing them as people and as nations and those gates are up. And when I sin my people who will go and preach the good news of the gospel, the gates of hell are not going to stop that. It might cost some lives, but the gospel's going to advance because you can't stop it and people from every tongue and every tribe and every nation will be around the throne of God with the face of Christ illuminating the heavens and the kingdom and we will worship him for all of eternity, with people from every single tribe, tongue, and nation. Then listen, this is a promise from Jesus and it's going to cost some of us our life. And he's worthy of it. He is worthy of it.

Listen, C.S. Lewis and The Screwtape Letters, he writes as the older demon trying to train the younger demon how to paralyze the spread of the gospel. And he says, listen, those people in the West, this is written 40 some years ago, those people in the West, what we need to do to make sure they're ineffective for the spread of the gospel is to make them as comfortable as we can. Because they're not willing to die for their faith, so if we can get them really comfortable, they won't have hardly any impact because they don't want to risk anything for the sake of the gospel. Listen, Paul, think about Paul, Philippians 1 real quick. We'll land the plane,

promise you. I want you to know brothers... So Philippi, Paul is in prison in Rome writing this letter.

I want you to know brothers that what's happened to me is really served to advance the gospel. When I first read that, if I don't know the context, I'm thinking, bro, what are you doing like a church growth conference and all the new ways, how to grow to church? Now he goes, I want you to know, brother what's happened to me has really served to advance God. What's happened to him? He's been in prison for preaching the gospel. He says, it's served to advance it so that it's become known throughout the whole Imperial Guard. What does that mean? This is what it means, it means every prisoner who checked in and did their time sheet and then went to the sale and when they had to oversee Paul, he preached the gospel to him. He shared the gospel. And then he says, and to all the rest of my imprisonment is for Christ.

So all the rest, who's all the rest? All the rest are all the other new prisoners. Prisoners are coming to prison each day in Rome. It's chaos. So new one comes in, he goes, man, let me tell you about a man that came back from the dead. He's just sharing the gospel over and over and over. And he's rejoicing in the fact that he's doing it. One church father, first, second century Tertullian says it like this, he says that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Thank with me for just a minute. Last Sunday, June 6th, last Sunday, we're in this room. We're worshiping. We're looking at 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, the first part of it. We sing some songs. We take communion. We have communion for Sunday. Man, it's a good Sunday. We leave. We go to First Watch, get a pancake, and enjoy the afternoon, take a little nap, hit the pool, it's summertime. Last Sunday, June 6th in Nigeria, a church was blown up and 50 were killed and the whole building was burned.

Not in like Acts chapter 7, no, last week. Last week. So listen and the pastor of that place says God didn't make a mistake in place in us here. It is our heart's desire that the church will remain here until Christ returns. So way of application, let's read and receive the word of God. Let's read it. Let's receive it. Let's sit under it. Let's respond in faith and obedience and joy. Listen, if you've never trusted Christ, today, I want to encourage you to admit your need for him, to believe on him and to commit your life to him. Today, maybe even today for the first time. You would trust him. Let us know. We want to walk with you. We want to encourage you. We want to give you a Bible and just support you any way that we can.

And then last is to let's be ready to suffer for the sake of the gospel. Let's be ready to suffer for the sake of the gospel. So here's what I'm going to do, a little something different. I want you... This recently, a ministry that we are connected with and just love their resources and seeing how God's using them called Open Doors. They've just released what they call the watch list of the top 10 countries it's most dangerous to be a follower of Jesus. And so I want you to watch this and I'm going to lead us in a time of prayer for them. Okay? So check this out.

There are countries where Christians live in fear, where churches are bombed and houses burned, where following Jesus means sacrificing jobs, security, family. There are countries where you must keep your faith secret or it might get you killed. These are the countries of the Open Doors world watch list, and here are the

10 countries where following Jesus costs the most.

Number 10, India. Many extremists claim that to be Indian is to be Hindu. They want an India without religious minorities and they are using violence to achieve it. Number nine, Iran. Iranian Christians must meet secretly. Being discovered could mean long sentences in appalling prisons. Number eight, Pakistan. Christians in Pakistan are considered second class citizens. Innocent believers are falsely accused of blasphemy. Thousands of women are victims of kidnapped and forced conversion. Number seven, Nigeria. Nigeria is the country where Christians face the most outright violence. Many Christians have been killed or driven from their homes. Number six, Eritrea. More than 1000 Christians are imprisoned for their faith in Eritrea. Some pastors have been locked up for over a decade without charge. Number five, Yemen. Yemeni culture is tribal. Those who leave the tribal faith could be banished or even killed.

Number four, Libya. In this lawless land, Libyan Christians have to keep their faith secret or risk punishment, arrest, or death. Number three, Somalia. Islamist extremists consider Somali Christians high value targets, so the tiny population of only a few hundred secret believers keep out of sight. Number two, North Korea. There are around 400,000 Christians in North Korea. All of them must hide their faith. Discovery means exile, execution, or being worked to death in horrific labor camps. Number one, Afghanistan. The Taliban takeover means that Afghanistan is the new number one, the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian. Many Christians have become refugees. Those who remain must keep their faith utterly secret.

There are countries where Christians live in fear, but fear can lead to courage and courage leads to hope. At least 360 million Christians around the world experience high levels of persecution and discrimination, but they have not given up, and for over 65 years, Open Doors has stood with them. Where Christians are persecuted, our global underground networks supply smuggled Bibles and Christian books, spiritual care, emergency food and aid, training and legal advice. Where Christians are free, we work with local churches to raise our voices in prayer, to speak truth to those in power, to strengthen our persecuted family around the world, because there are countries where Christians have to stay silent and there are countries where Christians can make a noise. But we are all connected, we are all family, and together we can help one another to follow Jesus, no matter the cost.

So Providence, think about the sovereignty of God for just a moment. The number one country in the world that's the most difficult to be a follower of Christ is Afghanistan. When the crisis took place this year and many jumped in the back of a cargo plane and flew out, hundreds arrived in Raleigh, North Carolina. Hundreds arrived 0.5 miles from Providence in an Extended Stay on Glenwood Avenue. We began to reach out to them and partnership ministry in the city and they were open to come and have a meal. We helped them get clothing and some toiletries just to get acclimated.

On Monday nights, we invited them for a dinner and as they came to the dinner in this building, there's a

brother in our church from the middle east who's been kicked out of his country who's a prof at a seminary just up the road who can speak their dialect exactly. So Monday nights, pray because the gospel is going out to a people group that we can't even get to and he's sovereignly bringing them to this place. That's miraculous. So I want you to bow your heads in your hearts as you've seen these 10 countries, pray, and then I'll lead us as we close.

Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom, come on earth as it is in heaven. God we know many are not hallowing your name, many are not worshiping your name, and yet there's remnants of followers in these hard places that you're using, God. You tell us in Hebrews to remember those who are in chains as if you were chained to them and God, it's so hard living this day and time to even think about that globally. God, would you this morning, even this hour, we pray, Psalm 46, that you would be a refuge and a strength, a very present help in trouble. You would be in their midst and that, God, for those even this very hour who are counting the cost of following you, as saying yes to you and to your ways will have to choose probably before the end of this day to renounce their faith or be killed?

So God would you by the power of your holy spirit give an increasing amount of joy and hope in the midst? And God would you by the power of your spirit, strengthen, God, strengthen, God, those who follow you, love you, our brothers and sisters in Christ in these hard places in Yemen and Iran and Afghanistan and Pakistan, Tajikistan, Russia and Indonesia. God, all over they're laboring never once using PowerPoint, never once being amplified, never once drinking a latte. God, just serving you, counting the costs day in, counting the costs day in. So God by your spirit this hour, this very moment, God would you by your spirit, speak and whisper words of comfort from your word where their Bibles had been burned and only the thing they have in their prison cell are memory verses that they've memorized? Would you bring it to mind?

Bring it to heart. Remind them that you never change. You'll never would give up on them. You will hold them steadfast to the end. Let it an ounce of hope rise. God, may they cling to you knowing that you are clinging to them. Would you remind them and whisper them Romans 8? Even this day good could come out of bad as it did out of the hill called Calvary and the cross of Christ. Make their boast, make our boast, the cross of Christ and all that took place there. God would you strengthen our faith, as Paul says, in all those that were in the prison where knew while he was in there and then he says and then those outside the walls became bolder with more confidence, not arrogant, but just with more confidence in your word? It's living to speak it.

So God would you do that in us? Would you cause us to speak these words from the gospel to our city even this day? God, we ask this in the strong, strong name of your son, Jesus the Christ. Amen and amen.



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