

**Pastor Tom Mortenson**

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

**November 10, 2013**

**IDOP Sunday 2013**

**International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**

**Prayer:** *Father, I do again thank you for this unique Sunday, this is IDOP Sunday and again, Lord, we just -- I pray for your Spirit's presence, I pray for the words that you've given me to speak but I pray especially for your Holy Spirit's moving in the hearts of our body, Lord. We need to have hearts that are on fire for your church. And Father, I pray your Holy Spirit who alone can do that, would do that this morning. And I pray that in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, IDOP Sunday is about two very distinct and critical issues that the church has been called to. One is prayer, and the other is the persecuted church. This is the Sunday where we put both of those together. This Sunday is IDOP Sunday and "IDOP" stands for the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. It's a day given to turn our attention to prayer for those willing to pay the price of publicly acknowledging Christ. And this morning I want to revisit the teaching on IDOP that I give each year by restating their official pronouncement. They said this:

*The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church is a global day of intercession for persecuted Christians worldwide. Its primary focus is the work of intercessory prayer and citizen action on behalf of persecuted communities of the Christian faith. We also encourage prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it. 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 to stand behind those who suffer for their faith by providing prayer, support and appropriate advocacy.*

We need a day like today. We need a day like today because we are easily distracted from this task, and truth be said, out of sight is very easily out of mind. Last time I asked why it is so critical to get our heads, our hearts, and our hands into the idea that the persecuted church deserves our passionate commitment. And first was our heads. My first question was a sports question. I said is your head, is your head in the game? You know, this question may sound strange at first, but having had lots of kids who were into sports and being around lots and lots of coaches, I

heard that said and spoken to players many, many times. "Is your head in the game?" It was a less than polite way of asking, "Do you care at all about what is going on all around you?" You see, the coaches knew that if a kid didn't really care about the game, that all the talent that he might have, well it -- it really wouldn't matter. If he wasn't mentally prepared to compete, if he didn't put the effort in to focus his mind on the task at hand, then it really wouldn't matter how skilled he was, his effort was going to fail. And when it comes to the persecuted church, it is 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 there is us who desperately need to pray. And to do that, we first need to get our head into the game of praying for the persecuted church.

Gospel for Asia says this: "Americans who have not experienced persecution do not fully understand what it means to have their lives threatened, homes destroyed, rights violated and loved ones imprisoned, all because of embracing faith in Jesus Christ," said K.P. Yohannan, GFA founder and president, in a statement. "In the 14 countries we serve, persecution of this sort has become a normal way of life, especially for those directly involved in mission work."

This morning I want to address the same question I addressed one year ago. It is the heart question that I address each year at this time. Actually it's a question I think that lingers inside the minds of most of us when it comes to this kind of prayer. And the question really is: Why should I? I mean, to put this cynically, if God is truly sovereign, why does he need us to pray for someone 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 it all. Why can't we just say, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done," and be done with it? I mean, after all, it is his kingdom and ultimately it is his will. So how can we imagine a sovereign God is somehow stopped in his tracks by my failure to pray? Well, fact is, he isn't, but he still insists that we pray. I'd like to give the organizers of IDOP a chance to address that issue. This is their official statement on prayer for the persecuted church. They said this: "We believe that prayer changes things. Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith. God invites us to present to Him our requests and to pray without ceasing. Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray."

This morning I'd like to first revisit the heart part of this message by unpacking that statement line by line. The first statement says: "We believe that prayer changes things." Is that

so? Well, I'd like to start out with one example. We have been praying for Saeed Abedini for a few years now. Pastor Abedini is an American citizen who had traveled to Iran to help out with an orphanage. He was pulled off a bus, given a sham trial and then sent off to prison. World Magazine recently reported this, said: "Iranian American Pastor Saeed Abedini has been moved to one of the country's most brutal prisons, according to his U.S.-based legal team." So how do with pray for Pastor Abedini? You see now, we as believers, we'd been able, so to speak, to get our head into the game by reading books like Nik Ripken's The Insanity of God, that book gave us an invaluable insight into how we should be praying for those undergoing persecution. This is what Ripken says. He says:

"For decades the Western church has been taught to pray and work for an end to the persecution of fellow believers around the world. We enlist our congregations, our denominations, and even our governments to speak out and pressure oppressive regimes and hostile nations to end discrimination. Sometimes we even demand that the persecutors be punished. 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 seldom encountered a mature believer living in persecution who asked us to pray that their persecution would

cease. We have never heard that request." Mind you, they've interviewed over 700 persecuted Christians. They say: "Rather, believers in persecution ask us to pray that 'they would be faithful and obedient through their persecution and suffering.'" That is a radically different prayer.

Saeed Abedini was imprisoned in Evin Prison which is a notoriously bad place. He sent his wife Naghmeh a letter that confirms what Ripken had said about persecuted believers, and in that letter you can see there's no request that the persecution would end. Rather there was this type of acknowledgment. This is what he said, "I forgave the prison doctor who did not listen to me and did not give me the medication that I needed. I forgave the interrogator who beat me. Every day when I would see the interrogator and for the last time when I saw him, I forgave him. I smiled at him and with respect shook his hand and I said my good-bye. The minute I forgave them and loved them, that second I was filled with unspeakable joy."

I just want you to take a second and imagine yourself, just imagine yourself being incarcerated in that prison having been a citizen of the United States living in the Midwest, and yet in the midst of that hideous prison we have find him saying that he was filled with an unspeakable joy. It is God alone who gives the power and the

grace for that and he does that in response to prayer. Now, our church and countless others have been praying intensely for Pastor Abedini only to find out the following, this is from *World Magazine*. It says: "Guards at Evin Prison told a family member who went to visit Abedini today that the pastor had been moved to Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj, about 90 minutes outside the nation's capital. Guards there told Abedini's family he was not allowed to have any visitors." In other words, he was moved from a really, really bad prison to one that is much, much worse. He goes on to say: "Rajai Shahr is known to house the country's worst criminals, murderers and rapists. Lawyers with the American Center for Law and Justice who represent Abedini's wife, say he now faces life-threatening conditions. A Dutch diplomat who visited the prison in 2005 described it as a place where political prisoners are sent for the most severe punishment. Because many of the criminals housed there already face the death penalty, violence between inmates is common."

So here's the question. The question is does prayer really change things? You know, many have been praying for Pastor Abedini's release from prison and that obviously has not happened. But I want to show you through the words of Pastor Abedini's wife Naghmeh just what prayer has done for this persecuted saint. I want you to look at a video that's up, this is his wife addressing Liberty

University about what's taken place in the life of Pastor Abedini:

(Naghmeh Abedini speaking through video:) Good morning. It's great to be here. As you know, my husband Saeed Abedini is serving an eight-year sentence in Iran's notorious Evin Prison which is one of the worst prisons actually in the world. He's been tortured and abused and forced to -- he's been asked and tortured to deny his Christian faith and return to Islam. And he has not. They've told him many times that they would free him and allow him to return to our family, the kids and I, if he would deny his Christian faith, and he stood strong in that prison. He's led many, many, over 30 people to Christ in that prison, and he -- he's endured a lot -- an intense time in that prison. He's been taken to solitary twice because they, in attempt to break him and have him deny his Christian faith. And the kids and I desperately want him back but we're proud that over us, he's chosen Christ even over coming back to us, he's chosen to stand up for his faith and not only stand up for his faith but to proclaim the gospel in that dark prison and bring hope where many of those people are on death row, have long term imprisonments, and for them -- for me to know that so many of them now know Christ, it makes it worth it. I know his imprisonment is not in vain.

I wanted to share something quick with you about my testimony.



When I heard about his imprisonment, I got a call in the middle of the night and my nightmare in a way started. My whole world was taken from me. Our -- my future, my best friend, my husband, my -- the father to my kids, and my whole future, finances and dreams and everything was taken from me, and I'd always feared what would happen if I lost someone or if I would go through an intense trial, if I would question God and his goodness. And I reached a deep, dark time of despair and I reached out to Jesus and I've known him since I was nine but I found the most -- I connected to him in such a deep way that not only did I not question his goodness, I proclaim his goodness and how awesome he is, and I got to drink of his goodness and he gave me strength to stand up and he's given me joy and peace. I've had atheists and Muslims come up to me and say there's something, there has to be something real about your God because you -- this is not possible for you to stand up and have so much peace and joy and to be able to give it to us, and you know, the world crumbles under pressure, but we not only survive it, but we thrive because only pressure allows us to even connect deeper with God, Almighty God. We have that. No religion has that. Only Jesus Christ has that. And under pressure, we are broken and we realize our weakness and we can connect to God and we can receive even more joy and peace, and the world doesn't understand that, and the world needs to see that in us, they need to see our -- our passionate walk and relationship and love story with Christ. And

you know, I would always be confused by something Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:9, he would say I take pleasure in my infirmities and my weakness and my, you know, distress and how? Why does he take pleasure? The Lord opened it up for me during this time because he realizes how weak he is and he discovers the strength of Christ.

And I just want to end with this, I want to say, you know, in this trial, I've tasted a new intimacy, I've reached a new intimacy with Christ that I pray that our nation and us as Christians would discover his goodness, because the world needs to see our relationship, and our fire, the truth of Jesus Christ. We can't be preaching it, we have to be living it. And in order to preach the gospel, we have to have experience it first. And you know, I have to say that when he brought me out of this darkness, he's allowed me to preach over -- in front of over a hundred nations, you know, I was present in June and I was speaking in front of the United Nations in Geneva and over 196 countries are there. And I got to tell them that Jesus Christ is the way to God and he's the God of peace they're looking for. And you know, Saeed and I had always dreamed to reach millions of Muslims for Christ. I got to do that. I got to go and media like BBC Farsi and Voice of America Persia that broadcasts into Iran, over fifty million Iranians got to hear me on live TV as they were watching to tell them about

*Jesus Christ, and so I praise God for that. I don't have a ministry, I'm just a girl who loves Jesus. At age nine, I asked the Lord, I was reading Psalms 2 and I asked the Lord for the nations. In Psalms 2 it says today I've begotten you, ask of me and I will give you the nations for your inheritance. I pray that tonight, today the Lord would awaken your desire to ask for nations for your inheritance, that you would be not lukewarm but you would be on fire for the living God and you would go out and ask. I would ask when I was nine, I would say Lord, give me the nation of Iran for my inheritance, I want it. I didn't see it until this year that I got to speak to millions of Iranians. I've led so many Muslims to Christ. Saeed and I have led hundreds and hundreds of Muslims to Christ and to see that become a reality, I pray that you would ask the nations as your inheritance. God bless you. (video concluded)*

Here's the question that we were asking. The question that we were asking is does prayer change things. I think we just got our answer. I mean, his wife is explaining the fact that -- you see, the Iranian government thought they could squash the gospel and they thought they could squash it by squashing Pastor Abedini, and here's his wife saying fifty million people have heard the gospel through her and we've learned that 30 people have learned that there's only one way to be right with God and it is not the five

pillars of Islam. They have learned something through Pastor Abedini that was absolutely unthinkable to a Muslim mindset, they've learned that God would become a man, live out his life perfectly on this earth, and then offer that life up as a perfect sacrifice in exchange for our sins on the cross. These men have learned in one of the darkest places on the planet that while they were still sinners, Christ died for them. It's because Pastor Abedini has been so effective that he's been sent to a far worse place. And we have learned from scripture that our task is to imagine the horror of the place that he is in, to place ourselves physically in his shoes trying to imagine the fear and the anxiety and even the despair that would haunt a hideous place like that. See, God calls us to such an exercise because we are connected to Pastor Abedini through the body of Christ. And God wants us to care as much about his fate as we were to care about any other 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 are also in the body.* We are called to pray for people like Pastor Abedini, to pray that he has the grace and the strength and the supernatural power that he needs to withstand that prison and to channel the light of Christ into even more darker places than that.

May I suggest to you that as recently as a few months ago, a few

years ago, we didn't even know how we were supposed to be praying. We didn't know how to pray for persecuted saints and we've been praying this way for a few years now and as we prayed, God has enlarged our vision on just what it is we are to be praying for. So we can affirm the first statement, we believe that prayer changes things.

The second statement is this: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." Now, to repeat what I said the last time, it's been said that all answered prayer begins and ends in the throne room of God. You see, when we pray, we are really a part of a very complex process that God uses to move things on earth. When God wants to move a mountain, he doesn't just move a mountain. The first thing he does is he starts to move some of us to pray that that mountain would be moved and then he moves the mountain in response to the prayer. You see, prayer is like the inner workings of a cell that is far more complex, far more wonderful than it appears on the surface. I've described the whole process as an electric circuit. The current flows first from the throne room of God then through us and then back to the Father for an answer. Here's how I believe it goes: The Father initiates, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes, we participate, Jesus advocates, and then the Father answers.

First, 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. God is the source of everything we do including what we pray for.*

Secondly, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes for us. *Romans 8:26* says: *Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

Just think about this for a second. What God is saying here is that our role in prayer is so crucial, is so critical that the Holy Spirit has to come alongside us, understanding that we don't do prayer as we ought. The Spirit of God works with us to empower and translate our efforts.

And thirdly, we participate. *Ephesians 6:18* tells us 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.* Fourthly, Jesus advocates. *1 John 2:1*: *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.* Finally, the Father answers. *2 Thessalonians 1:11*: *To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every*

*resolve for good and every work of faith by his power.* And then God reveals why it is we pray. He says: *so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.* What is amazing about this process is that it can be described as a circuit including Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and right in the middle of that circuit is a switch, and the switch is made up of human beings, you and me. The Father initiates, the Holy Spirit translates and intercedes, we participate, Jesus advocates, the Father answers. For God's own glory he has elected to run this circuit through human beings. You know, the second statement is: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." I agree, much of it is still mysterious. The great mystery is that God would use us in such a critical way to fulfill his role on this earth.

Statement three says this, it says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." Do you see why? We can just make a general statement, it's because God stoops to conquer. You know, there's no question that anything we can do, God can do better. So why does God waste all the time and effort inviting us to pray to him? I mean, why does God stoop so to involve us in his plans? Well, it has to do with who God has chosen to defeat the enemy. He's chosen us. Listen to what 2 *Corinthians 4* says, it says: *For what we proclaim is not*

ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. Here's what God is telling us, he's telling us we have been given the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and we've been given it to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

Now, I've often described our lives as we are the nexus, we are the connection in a proxy war we see being played out between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Satan caused all of creation to be cursed through Adam's fall. Jesus took on flesh and became the second Adam, and by his cross, he is leading us as we take back the kingdom from the enemy through prayer. It's as if God told Satan that his ultimate defeat would come not through his hands but through ours, and he tells us how we're going to do that. In *Zechariah 4:6* he says: *Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.* See, God stoops to conquer primarily through prayer. I'm still awestruck that God has chosen us as his means to meet his ends.

Consider God's treatment of Noah and the ark. God created the



entire universe in six days. God told his servant Noah to build an ark, and the scripture tells us he waited patiently year after year after year while it was being built. Clearly, God thought far more of the importance of Noah's input than he did about his own efficiency. I've said it before and it bears repeating, God using Noah to build an ark is like me using a hamster to plow a field all for the sake of the hamster. It's not very efficient. It's going to take him a long, long time. There's got to be an easier way. But you see, God never chooses on the basis of ease or efficiency.

And, you know, consider Satan himself, I mean, why didn't God just take Satan out the first time he rebelled? Why did God himself become one of us, live a spotless life and die the death we all deserved to die instead of just judging Satan's sin instantly? I mean, wouldn't that have solved the problem? Well, it would have solved a problem but not God's problem. God's problem is us. I mean, we are the crown of his creation. God has 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? We who will judge angels in the next life are to engage them in this one through prayer. Like I said, we are engaged in this proxy war that exists between two spiritual 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 that war. God could have defeated Satan instantly. After all, God created him. Instead, he chooses to defeat Satan through the agency of human beings, and he tells us his strength is made perfect through our weakness. God has chosen his weapon, and his weapon is you and me, that is the church of Jesus Christ. And he's very blunt about telling us, this is war and you're part of it. 2 Corinthians 10:3 says this: For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. In Ephesians 6:12 he 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. Like it or not, God has tied his kingdom into our prayer. That's why God tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5 to: *Pray without ceasing.* In Matthew 21:22 he says: *Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.* In Philippians 4:6 he says: *Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with Thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.* In Colossians 4:2: *Continue earnestly in the prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.* James 5:16: *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.* We saw that. We saw Elijah prove that on Mt. Carmel. This is what God is trying to show us constantly in scripture. In fact, he even gave us a literal picture of the power of prayer. It was during Israel's

very first battle with the Amelekites. If you remember, the Amelekites were an enemy of Israel and they were the first to attack their rear flank. Amelekites were the offspring of Esau. They were bitter foes then; they're bitter foes today. They are the forbearers of the present day Arab world which still obviously bitterly hates the Jews. Exodus describes the battle. This is what took place in *Exodus 17*. It says this: *And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.*

Do you see the picture that God is painting here? This is an amazing picture. Uplifted hands is the universal symbol of prayer, and when the hands were uplifted in prayer, victory was at hand. When the hands began to drop, well then defeat was at hand. Here's the amazing thing in all of this. If you notice, it's not the

warriors who are growing exhausted, it's not the archers, it's not the chariots, it's not the swordsmen here who are getting weary; it's Moses. It's the prayer warrior. See, God wanted Israel to know that its very survival as a nation was a function of its corporate prayer. See, I think we will never know this side of heaven how crucial our prayers are to these churches that are under attack today. Moses grew physically exhausted, we grow mentally and spiritually exhausted because we don't really understand the cause, so we start to doubt the effect.

If you doubt how important this human connection is to God, let me give you another example. In Acts 10 we have the story of Peter and Cornelius. It's a firsthand account of the power of prayer. Cornelius is a devout and righteous man who's seeking God in prayer. In Acts 10:1-4 it says this: *There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people and prayed to God always. About the ninth hour of the day, he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" And when he observed him, he was afraid and said, "What is it, lord?" So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God."*

First off, how'd you like to have that as answer to your prayers? Would you like to be praying and all of a sudden there's an angel standing right there and saying, "We hear you." That's a pretty amazing statement. God tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to find Peter. He even gives Cornelius directions to where Peter is staying. This is *Acts 10:32*, he 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.* God's literally giving street directions to Cornelius to find this fellow Peter. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit in the rooftop vision to Peter tells him to meet with Cornelius, and all of this begs a very important question. Why go to all this trouble? I mean, why did God send Peter to answer Cornelius' prayer instead of just answering it himself? You know why? Well, it goes back to that same circuit of prayer that I spoke about at the beginning. God sent Peter to Cornelius because he wanted a human in that formula. In *Acts 10*, God is literally -- he's pulling both Peter and Cornelius together. He's giving Cornelius a Google map and he's telling Peter "I'm going to give you a vision." *Acts 10:19* 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 about this for a second. This is God himself literally arranging a meeting of some humans. It goes on to say in *verse 21*: *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 nations of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you." Why didn't God just tell Cornelius himself? You know, Cornelius is seeking God, God says, "Wonderful prayer, Cornelius. Let me get you a human." That's amazing. "Let me divinely instruct a holy angel to summon Peter for you." Those are the exact words that he used. Again, the question is why and again, the answer is we are in the middle of a proxy war and we are God's weapon.

Statement three says: "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." That's because God stoops to conquer and we are the agency that he stoops to work 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." The whole IDOP statement is really an answer to the question that I raised at the start of this, and that question was: Why should I? Well, let's review the bidding, see if we understand where our heads, our hearts, and our hands belong here. Again, to quote IDOP, they said: "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 has all changed and it is all grown directly as the result of prayer. Pastor Abedini's ministry and his very life are being held up and empowered by that prayer, so we can say yes, we do believe that prayer changes things.

Secondly, it says: "Exactly what happens is a mystery of faith." Well, God gives us this immense privilege of being part of this circuit that connects heaven to earth through us. It's a sacred privilege and a sacred responsibility.

Thirdly, "God invites us to present to him our requests and to pray without ceasing." This is the heart part. Like Moses, we lift our hearts in prayer and the kingdom advances. Like Moses, we grow weary or disheartened and the enemy advances. And fourthly, "Persecuted Christians often plead for prayer to help them endure. The most we can do is the least we can do -- pray." Obviously this is the hands, the feet part. And this last sentence really says it all: "The most we can do is the least we can do."

You know, there are two great sin issues that we Christians deal with; two different types of sins. There are sins of commission; those are things that we do that we are not supposed to do. But there also are sins of omission, things that we don't do that we

are supposed to do. We evangelicals are very big on the former and very small on the latter. That is, we don't curse, steal, lie, cheat, or lust very much and if we do, we certainly are aware that it's sinful. But I think we seldom think that God holds us accountable for things that we simply forget to do or things that we just don't feel like doing. Prayer is one of those things. *James 4:17* sums up God's opinion of the sins of omission. He says this: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* See, God has made it crystally clear what his expectations are concerning those who are being persecuted for Christ's sake. *Hebrews 13:3* 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 us a very simple one-word command: Remember. Remember.

Now I want to repeat this awful picture that I've said before. I have in mind this picture, I'm standing before God and he's judging my life, and he's pointing out some very obvious things to me. He says this, he says, "Tom, I placed you in the wealthiest country on earth, in the safest country on earth, in a place where you'll never have to worry about whether you're going to get enough food to eat or have a roof over your head. I placed you in a place where you'll 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 --" at least yet. "But this much I ask of you: Remember the prisoners as if chained with them." Imagine if God then asked you, "Can you tell me the name of a single prisoner who you chose to remember? Can you show me that you cared enough to remember even one of them?" My answer would be: Saeed Abedini in Iran, Gao Zhisheng in China, the families of Uger Nacati and Tillman in Turkey, the Christians living in Dogo Nahawa, the small village south of Joshua who were butchered by Muslim fanatics in Nigeria; Maryam Rustampoor and Marzieh Amirizadeh, the two women who were arrested and imprisoned for their faith in Iran who defied the authorities in court by insisting that Jesus and not Allah was God. By grace and through prayer, these women are now free, they've written a book: *Captive In Iran*. We've talked about and remembered them all each Wednesday at corporate prayer. I hope by now all of us have heard about Asia Bibi, she's a 45-year-old Pakistani mother of five sentenced to be hung for the crime of claiming Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. Will you remember her as if chained in prison with her? She's one of the thousands who are still part of the persecuted church.

You see, there's good news in this, and there's bad news in this. The good news is that there are organizations like the Voice of the Martyrs now who make it so incredibly simple and easy to pray for

and care for our persecuted brothers and sisters, that much of the heavy lifting, it's already been done for us. In fact, there's a brand new tool available for anyone with a smart phone or a computer. If you look on your screen, it should pop up there right now. This is an amazing website. I challenge you to go on to that website and just start looking at what they have there. There's a lot of films about individual people and the films are graphic, they're difficult, they're bloody, they're not fun to watch, but these are real people that we are challenged to remember. You can get these studies on these saints directly off the IDOP website or the Voice of the Martyrs website as well. They also make it incredibly easy to write our brothers and sisters in prison in whatever language they speak. I just sent a letter off to Evin Prison. Cost me \$1.49 in postage. They'll help you put it together, just to encourage our brothers and sisters who are in foreign prisons. You can also sign petitions demanding their release. I've done that as well.

And all that is the good news. The bad news is that we have absolutely no excuse for refusing to remember our brothers and sisters. James says: *Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.* You might say well, that's being awfully legalistic, isn't it? That's not grace; that's law. Here's the rub. I'm only doing what James 4 is telling me to do.

You see, I know for me the good that is necessary is to tell you what God's expectation of us is. And if I neglected to do that, for me, it's sin. I mean, we're really not talking about the difference between grace and law. We're talking about the difference between grace and disgrace.

If you notice in that proclamation I read this morning, it called for prayer not just for persecuted Christians, it also said this, it said: "We also encourage the prayer for the souls of the oppressors, the nations that promote persecution, and those who ignore it." Now, for many years I've had to count my name among those who have chosen to ignore it. Just too much other stuff going on. I think God is saying 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. 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 years I didn't get it, and I get it now. Head, heart, and hands 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 the question and the challenge that I have for all of us this morning is: Do we?

Let me conclude with their final prayer. "Let us pray: To encourage and empower Christians to fulfill the Great Commission in areas of the world where they are persecuted for their involvement in propagating the gospel of Jesus Christ. To give relief to the families of Christian martyrs in these areas of the world. To equip local Christians to win to Christ those persecutors who are opposed to the gospel in countries where believers are actively persecuted for their Christian witness. To undertake projects of encouragement helping believers rebuild their lives and Christian witness in countries that have formerly suffered 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."

*Father, I just want to add my prayer to this prayer. I want to thank you for the heart that this church has, the desire that this church has to pray for the persecuted church. Father, I just thank you for all those who have joined in that effort, for all those who make that it their business to understand and know and be familiar with names like Gao Zhisheng, Saeed Abedini, people like that. Father, I just thank you that you are moving in this church. I pray that you would continue to move, that each of us would have our hearts torn by what we see our brothers and sisters going through and give us your heart for this, give us the ability to*

*remember those in chains, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*