

The Persecuted and the Persecutors

An International Day of Prayer Sermon Guide

A Note to Presenting Pastors: This message tells the true story of a persecuted believer and his family, shared with International Christian Concern. Names and identifying details have been changed throughout to protect the family's safety and the safety of others still in the region. Please do not substitute real names, photos, or video footage of the family when delivering this message — even well-intentioned personalization can put real people at risk. Feel free to adapt the opening to your own voice and congregation.

Introduction

Thank you so much for being here today. You could be anywhere else doing a hundred other things, but you chose to be here, and I believe God is going to use this time in your life.

Today we're going to talk about the persecuted Church — and about the persecutors too. That's not a combination we usually put in the same sentence, but by the end of this message, I think you'll understand why we have to.

We tend to think about persecution as a category — a headline, a statistic, a somewhere-far-away tragedy. And the statistics are staggering: International Christian Concern and other ministries estimate that hundreds of millions of Christians worldwide live under some meaningful threat of persecution for their faith. But statistics don't bleed. Statistics don't have families, or a favorite hymn they hum while they hide. So instead of statistics today, I want to tell you a true story.

If you have your Bibles, turn with me to [Hebrews 13:3](#). If you don't have one with you, it's on the screen. As you turn there, understand that in more than 50 countries in this world, the book you're holding is illegal — and simply opening it could get you arrested, tortured, or killed. Aren't you glad we don't have to worry about that here?

Let's read it out loud together:

“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” — Hebrews 13:3

Hold onto that verse. Everything I'm about to tell you is what it looks like lived out.

Let me set the scene.

In August 2021, western forces pulled out of Afghanistan, and the Taliban — an Islamic extremist organization — took control of the country almost overnight. Within days, they installed a totalitarian, theocratic Islamic state, one where belief in Jesus Christ is punishable by death. Not by fine. Not by imprisonment alone. By death. A Taliban spokesperson stood in front of cameras in those early weeks and stated, plainly, that there are no Christians in Afghanistan.

He was wrong.

Before the fall, ministries on the ground estimated there were at least 10 to 12 thousand Christians living in Afghanistan — worshipping in secret, meeting in twos and threes behind locked doors, hiding Bibles the way other people hide contraband. That's not very many people in a country of 45 million. But we know from [Matthew 18:20](#), *“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”* Ten thousand hidden believers in a hostile nation, still clinging to their faith, assured that God was with them.

International Christian Concern was committed to helping those underground believers. Through contacts established long before the fall of Kabul, ICC staff knew — at least for a while — where some of them were, and what they needed to survive.

Imagine being trapped in your own country, your own home, surrounded now by violent extremists who — if they knew what you believed in your heart — would drag you into the town square and execute you in front of your

neighbors. It doesn't matter if you're a grown man, a mother, or a child. In their eyes, you are the enemy. Owning a Bible is a death sentence. Praying, singing a hymn under your breath, teaching your children who Jesus is — all of it has to happen in total secrecy. And even then, even behind locked doors and drawn curtains, your own family might be the ones who expose you.

What would you do?

I'll be honest — I don't know that my faith is strong enough for that. I would fear for myself. I would fear for my family, my home, everything I'd built. If I were confronted, I don't know that I wouldn't deny Him, the way Peter did, just to see another sunrise.

But that is not what one Afghan believer did.

Point #1: God's Calling Is More Important Than Survival

For his safety, and the safety of those who love him, we'll call him Farid.

Farid was a Christian man in Afghanistan whom ICC staff had been quietly working with for years. When the Taliban took over, ICC sent word to believers in hiding: “Take this money. Buy enough food to survive. Stay hidden, and if you see the opportunity, escape. Get to the border of Pakistan — we'll be there waiting to receive you.”

Many believers made it across. Farid and his family weren't among them.

Instead of using the money to escape, Farid decided to stay and quietly share the gospel. He did buy food — but gave much of it away to neighbors he believed needed it more, using every conversation as an opportunity to talk about Christ.

When ICC staff learned he was staying, they were stunned, and more than a little frustrated. Through a translator, they pleaded with him — his actions were noble, but he was putting himself and the people he was “helping” in danger. He wouldn't hear it. They begged him to at least send his wife and children ahead, because they wouldn't be spared either.

He said simply, “This is where God needs me.”

They told him plainly that he would likely be killed if he stayed — that the very people he was praying with might report him.

But he was resolved that God wanted him there.

To the staff trying to save him, the choice seemed obvious: alive is better than dead, free is better than captured, a father with his children in Pakistan is better than a father buried in Afghanistan. It felt so obvious that it was hard to understand why a reasonable man wouldn't see it too.

But Farid wasn't weighing survival. He was weighing obedience.

(Transition — plant the lesson lightly, don't dwell) Farid believed something that's easy to say from a comfortable pew and unbearably hard to live out in a warzone: that God's calling on a life outweighs the instinct to preserve it. Paul wrote it plainly in [Philippians 1:21](#) — “*For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*” Not “to die is tragedy.” Gain. Farid wasn't reckless. He wasn't suicidal. He was simply convinced, down in his bones, that his life was never really his own to protect in the first place. It belonged to the One who gave it to him.

Farid didn't stay in Afghanistan to become a martyr. He stayed to hand out food and talk about Jesus. His calling wasn't dramatic — it was ordinary faithfulness in an extraordinary circumstance. That's worth remembering, because most of us will never be asked to die for our faith. But all of us are asked, every day, to do the small, ordinary things — the sharing, the giving, the showing up — even when it costs us something.

Point #2: You Are Not in Control — Only God Is

ICC lost contact with Farid a few weeks later. The rumors were that he'd been taken by the Taliban, and possibly his family too. Staff were devastated, but not surprised.

Weeks after that, an ICC worker in Pakistan was visiting with a woman who had been helping identify fleeing Christians and find them housing. During the visit, she said Farid's name. She had news.

She confirmed he had been captured — but that he was in prison, still alive, awaiting a trial that would almost certainly end in his execution. He was beyond reach.

“What about his family?” the ICC worker asked.

She said Farid's wife and their young children were still in hiding, and that she was in contact with them. Word was sent immediately: “Drop everything and get to the border. We'll be there. We'll provide money and housing. You'll be safe.”

Days later, word came back.

They weren't coming. They said they would stay near Farid.

Staff spent weeks trying to convince the family to leave — that Farid wasn't getting out, and that they were bound to be discovered too. That for the children's sake, they should run.

They wouldn't. Eventually, contact was lost with them as well. To this day, ICC doesn't know what became of Farid or his family. Some rumors say he's still alive, still in prison. No one knows for certain.

Not-knowing is one of the harder things to carry in this work. We like resolution. We like stories that end with rescue, reunion, a photo of a family safely across the border, smiling. ICC staff wanted that ending so badly that they spent weeks trying to engineer it themselves — the money, the contacts, the plan were all in place. What they didn't have — what none of us ever really have — was control over another person's obedience to God, or over God's own timeline.

Rescue was never actually theirs to give. Proverbs 19:21 says, “*Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.*”

This is a hard lesson, and it isn't one you learn once and move past. God keeps teaching it, in small and large ways, for a lifetime. We want to be the hero of someone else's story. There's nothing wrong with fighting for the people we love — Scripture never tells us to stop trying. But it does tell us who actually holds the outcome. Isaiah 55:8 reminds us, “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD.*” Work hard. Love well. Show up. And release your grip on the outcome, because it was never yours to hold.

Point #3: The Persecutors Need Our Prayers Too

Still, the grief for those working the case turned to fury. Videos had circulated of what the Taliban had done to other believers — brothers and sisters in Christ. Pure evil. Irredeemable, it seemed.

One ICC staff member's mentor caught him in that state and asked to pray with him. He assumed they'd pray for Farid and his family. Instead, his mentor said they were going to pray for the Taliban.

He was livid. Pray for the Taliban? They started all of this — the bloodshed, the persecution. He wasn't going to waste a prayer on them.

His mentor let him rail, and scream, and cry, without interruption. Then the mentor began to pray:

“Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do.”

The same words Jesus spoke on the cross, about the very people killing Him — Luke 23:34.

Something in that staff member broke open — not because he suddenly felt warm and forgiving toward the Taliban, but because he realized that if Jesus could say those words while hanging on a cross, then his own anger, as justified

as it felt, was not the same thing as righteousness. Anger at injustice isn't sin — Jesus felt it too. But anger that hardens into a refusal to pray for someone is something believers can't hold onto, regardless of what someone deserves.

(Transition) Consider this: the man who wrote most of the New Testament once hunted Christians down and had them imprisoned and killed. His name was Saul of Tarsus before it was Paul, and he stood approvingly by while a man named Stephen was stoned to death for his faith — you can read it in Acts 8. Paul called himself the “chief of sinners” in 1 Timothy 1:15 — not as a figure of speech, but as an honest confession from a man who knew exactly what he'd done. And yet God stopped him on a road, blinded him, and turned the church's greatest enemy into its greatest missionary.

If grace could reach a man who murdered Christians, it can reach anyone. Even the Taliban. That doesn't mean we excuse what they do, or stop working to protect the persecuted from them — ICC continues that work every day. But it does mean that when we pray, we pray for everyone Jesus died for. Everyone. Romans 5:8 tells us, “*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” We were the enemy once too. The only difference between us and the Taliban is not the size of the sin — it's the timing of the grace.

What This Means for Us Today

This is why the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church matters. It's easy to feel like our prayers from here don't reach very far. But Hebrews 13:3 doesn't ask us to fix it — it asks us to remember, to enter into it as if it were our own suffering. That's something every single person in this room can do today.

So here's what I'd ask of you, practically, before we close.

First — pray specifically. Not just a general “be with the persecuted church” prayer, though keep praying that. Pray by name for a region or group you find hard to pray for. Let that be your Taliban prayer.

Second — stay informed and give voice. Visit International Christian Concern at persecution.org to read verified stories and updates from the field, and share what you learn so others know the truth.

Third — consider giving. ICC's work — smuggling aid, resettling families, running small-business projects for those in hiding — is possible because ordinary believers like you fund it.

Conclusion

There are three things this story teaches, things that are hard to learn and harder to live.

First: God's will and calling is more important to true believers than survival. There are those, especially in places of heavy persecution, who know the truth better than we do. They know God is in control — and they live like it, even when it costs them everything.

Second: we are not going to save everyone. We are not God. It is not up to us whether someone lives or dies. Work hard. Do good work. But don't ever believe you're the one in control. Only God is.

Third: the persecutors need our prayers too. No one is irredeemable. God loves the persecutor as much as He loves the persecuted, as much as He loves you and me. It's not for us to judge who is worthy of grace and who is worthy of fire. Paul himself was a persecutor — and became the chief architect of the faith he once tried to destroy.

This story isn't told so you'll feel guilty for the safety you live in. It's told because it's a mirror. It shows what unshakable faith looks like when tested all the way to the edges, and it asks a quiet, uncomfortable question: would our faith survive that kind of pressure? Faith like Farid's isn't manufactured in the moment of crisis — it's built in all the ordinary moments before it. In the way we read our Bibles when no one's forcing us to. In the way we pray for people who are hard to love. In the way we give when it costs us something.

ICC has served tens of thousands of persecuted Christians over the years, and countless believers who stand in the face of persecution still proudly proclaim the words of Romans 8:31 — “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*”

Farid believed that. His family believed it. And as far as anyone knows, they believe it still, wherever they are today.

Will you be a church that believes it too — for yourselves, for your persecuted family around the world, and yes, even for your enemies?

Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for believers like Farid, whose obedience is an inspiration to us. We ask You to protect the persecuted church around the world today, wherever they are hiding, wherever they are afraid. We ask for supernatural courage for them, and supernatural conviction for us. And Lord, as hard as it is, soften our hearts toward our enemies, the way Christ's heart was soft toward His, even from the cross. Forgive them, Father — and forgive us, too, for the sins we don't think we need forgiveness for. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.