

## OPPOSITION EQUALS OPPORTUNITY

TODAY IS THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH. WHILE WE IN AMERICA ARE MOSTLY—NOT ENTIRELY, BUT MOSTLY—SHIELDED FROM RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION, THE SAME CANNOT BE SAID ABOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD.

IN THE REST OF THE WORLD, RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IS THE NORM RATHER THAN THE EXCEPTION. AND 80% OF THE RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN THE WORLD IS AGAINST CHRISTIANS. CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN PERSECUTED: IT IS ESTIMATED THAT SINCE JESUS' TIME OVER 70 MILLION CHRISTIANS HAVE DIED FOR THEIR FAITH. AND TODAY THE PERSECUTION IS INCREASING. OF THE 2.2 BILLION CHRISTIANS IN THE WORLD, AROUND 100 MILLION ARE BEING PERSECUTED. BETWEEN 2000 AND 2010, OVER 100,000 CHRISTIANS A YEAR DIED FOR THEIR FAITH.

WHILE A LOT OF THIS PERSECUTION TAKES PLACE IN MUSLIM COUNTRIES, A LOT OF IT TAKES PLACE ELSEWHERE AS WELL. AS A MATTER OF FACT, THE COUNTRY IN WHICH THE GREATEST NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS DIED FOR THEIR FAITH IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, IS THE SOVIET UNION. BUT RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION DOESN'T ALWAYS COME IN THE FORM OF PHYSICAL ATTACKS—IT CAN COME IN MORE SUBTLE FORMS AS WELL.

IN OUR OWN COUNTRY FOR EXAMPLE, GOVERNMENT AUTHORITIES RANGING FROM TOWN HALLS TO THE SUPREME COURT ARE INCREASINGLY PROHIBITING RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION IN THE PUBLIC ARENA—FROM SCHOOLS AND COURTHOUSES TO PARKS AND THE TOWN SQUARE. WHICH IS IRONIC SINCE THE FIRST AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION WAS PUT IN PLACE TO PROTECT THE FREE EXERCISE OF RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION.

SOMETIMES, RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION TAKES PLACE WITHIN THE SAME RELIGIOUS GROUP. A GOOD EXAMPLE IS JEWS FOR JESUS. THE FIRST JEWS FOR JESUS WERE THE TWELVE APOSTLES WHO FORMED THE EARLY CHURCH IN JERUSALEM IN THE NAME OF THEIR JEWISH MESSIAH. THAT'S RIGHT—THE FIRST CHRISTIANS WERE JEWS. AND THE CHURCHES THE APOSTLES PLANTED THROUGHOUT JUDEA, SAMARIA, EGYPT ASIA MINOR AND GREECE ALL HAD JEWISH CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY. BUT MOST JEWS REJECTED JESUS AS THEIR SAVIOR AND THIS CONTINUED FOR ALMOST TWENTY CENTURIES.

IN THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY, HOWEVER, JEWISH INTEREST IN CHRISTIANITY REVIVED. A JEWISH MAN BY THE NAME OF MOISHE ROSEN FOUNDED JEWS FOR JESUS TO BRING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST TO JEWS AROUND THE WORLD. THIS DID NOT GO UNNOTICED BY THE LARGER JEWISH COMMUNITY WHICH DISPLAYED INTENSE HOSTILITY TO JEWS FOR JESUS.

A GOOD EXAMPLE OF THIS HOSTILITY THEY FACE TOOK PLACE IN JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA A FEW MONTHS AGO. JEWS FOR JESUS HAVE A SINGING GROUP CALLED "THE LIBERATED WAILING WALL" AND IT WAS SCHEDULED TO GIVE A CONCERT AT WITS UNIVERSITY. A GROUP OF HOSTILE JEWISH STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY PROTESTED THE CONCERT BY SHOUTING OBSCENITIES AT THEM, SCATTERING THEIR SOUND EQUIPMENT AND EVEN BRANDISHING WEAPONS IN THEIR FACE. (SEE—IT'S NOT ONLY ON AMERICAN UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES THAT STUDENT MOBS SHUT DOWN FREEDOM OF SPEECH.)

AS THEY WERE BEING ESCORTED OUT OF THE THEATER BY THE POLICE, A WOMAN WHO WAS A REPORTER FROM REUTERS APPROACHED DAVID BRICKNER, THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR JEWS FOR JESUS, AND ASKED HIM FOR AN INTERVIEW. HE AGREED AND THE NEXT DAY AN ACCOUNT OF THE INCIDENT WAS IN HEADLINES ALL OVER SOUTH AFRICA. THEY WERE INVITED BY THE PASTOR OF A LARGE LOCAL CHURCH IN A HEAVILY JEWISH PART OF TOWN TO GIVE A CONCERT. ANOTHER UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA INVITED THEM TO GIVE A CONCERT ON THEIR CAMPUS. WHEN THEY BOARDED AN AIRPLANE FOR AUSTRALIA—THE NEXT STOP ON THEIR CONCERT TOUR—THEY WERE GIVEN FIRST CLASS SEATS, COURTESY OF THE AIRLINE. AND WHEN THEY REACHED AUSTRALIA, THE NEWS OF WHAT HAD HAPPENED HAD PRECEDED THEM AND THEY WERE WELCOMED BY ENTHUSIASTIC AUDIENCES.

FROM THIS EXPERIENCE AND MANY OTHER SIMILAR ONES, THE JEWS FOR JESUS HAVE MADE THEIR SLOGAN: "OPPOSITION EQUALS OPPORTUNITY." WHAT THEY ROUTINELY EXPERIENCE IS NOTHING NEW: IT IS EXACTLY THE SAME EXPERIENCE PAUL HAD IN HIS MISSIONARY JOURNEYS. EVERYWHERE HE PREACHED THE GOSPEL—IN JERUSALEM, SYRIA, ASIA MINOR, MESOPOTAMIA AND GREECE—HE ENCOUNTERED FIERCE RESISTANCE—FROM JEWS. BUT LIKE JESUS, PAUL NEVER STOPPED WITNESSING TO THOSE WHO OPPOSED HIM. FOR PAUL AS WELL, OPPOSITION EQUALED OPPORTUNITY.

TODAY WE ARE HONORING ANOTHER ORGANIZATION THAT WORKS TIRELESSLY TO BRING ATTENTION TO THE SUFFERING OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AROUND THE WORLD. IT IS CALLED "VOICE OF THE MARTYRS" AND I WOULD LIKE TO SHOW YOU A SHORT VIDEO WHICH TELLS YOU A LITTLE ABOUT THEM.

[SHOW 8 MINUTE VIDEO]

A FEW YEARS AGO, KAREN AND I ATTENDED A PROGRAM HERE IN CLEVELAND SPONSORED BY VOICE OF THE MARTYRS. SEVERAL HUNDRED PEOPLE ATTENDED THE EVENT AND IT WAS PROBABLY THE MOST INSPIRING PROGRAM I'VE EVER ATTENDED. THE SPEAKERS WERE MISSIONARIES WHO HAD SPENT YEARS PREACHING THE GOSPEL, TEACHING THE BIBLE AND RAISING UP EVANGELISTS IN COUNTRIES WHERE CHRISTIANS ARE PERSECUTED.

ONE SPEAKER WAS AN ENTHUSIASTIC YOUNG WOMAN FROM OKLAHOMA WHO HAD SPENT TEN YEARS IN INDIA, WHERE THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IS FIERCE AND RELENTLESS. SINCE THERE IS A WARRANT OUT FOR HER ARREST, SHE HAS TO SNEAK INTO NORTHERN INDIA OVER ITS BORDER WITH PAKISTAN TO DO HER WORK, KNOWING THAT IF SHE IS EVER CAUGHT SHE WILL PROBABLY BE KILLED. YET SHE CONTINUES TO DO HER WORK IN INDIA AND I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER SEEN ANYONE WHO LOVES WHAT THEY DO AS MUCH AS THAT YOUNG LADY DOES. SHE KNOWS WHO SHE SPEAKS FOR AND SHE IS UNAFRAID AND FILLED WITH JOY. PERSONALLY I CAN'T IMAGINE A MORE BLESSED EXISTENCE. AMEN.

### **Matthew 5:10-12**

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### **Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-8:3**

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke...When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep...And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church.

Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.