

# Please Pray for India's Suffering Christians

India welcomed President Trump in style this week, complete with traditional dancers, floral garlands, a tour of the famed Taj Mahal and a formal state dinner at the presidential palace in New Delhi. But the biggest moment was a huge afternoon rally on Feb. 24 at the world's largest cricket stadium in the city of Ahmedabad. The crowd of 110,000 cheering supporters was the largest live audience of Trump's career so far.

With giant screens showing images of Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the rally was designed to foster friendship between India and the United States. And President Trump poured on the love, calling Modi "a tremendously successful leader." After Modi officially welcomed Trump to "the biggest democracy in the world," Trump used the words "democratic," "peaceful" and "tolerant" to describe India.

I understand how diplomacy works. It's a slow dance. World leaders have to say a lot of nice things to each other before they can get down to serious business. But I hope at some point during our president's 36-hour visit, he told Prime Minister Modi that Americans know about India's horrific abuse of religious freedom.

Because when it comes to the persecution of Christians, India has one of the worst records in the world.

In an interview after the official India visit, Trump told *The New York Times* that he did raise the issue of religious freedom in his talks with Modi. "We did talk about religious freedom, and I will say that the prime minister was incredible on what he told me. He wants people to have religious freedom, and very strongly," Trump said.

I hope that's true. But If Modi truly wants to enforce

religious freedom in India, he will meet with a storm of resistance from his own political allies. The people who elected him are willing to burn churches and kill Christians—as well as Muslims—to create a Hindu state.

“Today, Christians across India are living in fear,” say leaders of the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America, or FIACONA. In a letter they wrote to Trump prior to this week’s visit, they said: “Pastors, social workers and ordinary Christians are arrested, tortured or killed. Christian properties are burnt or destroyed by supporters of the ruling party.”

That “ruling party” is the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP. It is a militantly pro-Hindu organization, and its core members want to make India a Hindu state. BJP militants don’t want Muslims in the country, they hate Christians as well—and they want to force all Indians to adopt a Hindu diet. They were emboldened in 2014 when Modi was elected.

According to the Alliance Defending Freedom India, at least 328 violent attacks on Indian Christians were documented there in 2019. Twelve more incidents took place in the state of Uttar Pradesh while the others happened in Haryana, Chattisgarh and Telangana, according to International Christian Concern.

“Nobody should be persecuted because of their faith,” says Tehmina Arora, a Supreme Court lawyer in India. He recently told *The Catholic Herald* that violence against Christians has become a trend. “In India, more and more Christians suffer from an increasing number of physical and verbal assaults,” he added.

Arora said most of the attacks are perpetrated by radical Hindu nationalists who stir up angry mobs. He also noted that only a small percentage of those cases were prosecuted by the police—because the police are sympathetic to the BJP. How can

we pray? Here are a few guidelines:

**Pray for true freedom in India.** The Bible instructs us to pray for kings and those in authority “so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim. 2:2b, NASB). If India is a true democracy, the government must denounce mob rule and stop harassing and killing those who are not Hindus.

**Pray for boldness for Christians.** Many Christians in India feel alone and afraid. Pray that God will give them courage to live out their faith and to share the message of Christ regardless of the consequences.

**Pray for a spiritual awakening in India.** Jesus told us that when He sent the Holy Spirit into the world, He would “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8b). The Spirit is working in India. The gospel has been preached there since the first century, when the apostle Thomas first arrived from Israel. Churches are growing rapidly there today in spite of severe resistance. Pray that spiritual darkness is pushed back as the message of Jesus spreads.

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## **Was the Flowing Oil in Dalton a Hoax?**

For three years the team at Flowing Oil Ministries in Dalton, Georgia, said oil was supernaturally flowing from a Bible owned by a man named Jerry Pearce. People traveled to the north Georgia city from all over the country to see the Bible,

receive prayer and take home a small vial of the clear oil. More than 350,000 vials of the oil have been given away since the miracle reportedly began in early 2017.

But today, 400 gallons of oil later, leaders of the ministry say the miracle stopped on Jan. 10. On Feb. 11 they canceled regular worship services, which were being held in the Wink Theater in Dalton. And the ministry's website says revival meetings scheduled in Arizona, North Carolina, California and other states have all been canceled. What happened?

The abrupt announcement came around the time that the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* published an investigative article claiming that Pearce had been seen regularly buying mineral oil at a local Tractor Supply store in Dalton. Two store managers told the *Times* they saw Pearce making the purchases. And when the newspaper ran chemical tests on the oil, they reportedly found the substance exactly matched the oil sold at the store.

Leaders of the ministry reject the idea that they were fabricating the miracle. They have maintained from the beginning that the oil first appeared as a small smudge in Psalm 39 and that it eventually soaked the entire book. Leaders then put the Bible in a plastic bag, and later in a glass container, and claimed that the oil kept flowing.

As reports spread, people began flocking to Dalton to be anointed by the oil. Sometimes ministry leaders would lay the dripping Bible on people's heads at the altar. Some visitors claimed to be healed, while others said they sensed God's presence in a special way.

Now, the ministry has shut down, at least temporarily. In a statement posted on Flowing Oil's website, leaders said that Pearce's purchase of oil at the local store "was made without the knowledge or approval of anyone else in the ministry and we are seeking the full truth of these accusations." The

statement also says Pearce has expressed remorse “for having caused the integrity of the work of God to be questioned because of his action.”

Pearce later admitted in a Feb. 18 interview with the *Times* that he did in fact buy eight gallons of mineral oil from Tractor Supply on one occasion to pour on the Bible. “I was going to pour that oil on the Bible when the Bible quit producing oil,” he told the newspaper. “But the Lord checked my spirit on it.”

I’ve seen it all when it comes to the ups, downs and embarrassing quirks of the charismatic movement. It wasn’t that long ago when a small church in Illinois claimed that diamonds, rubies and emeralds were falling from their ceiling during worship services. People flocked to that place to see the “miracle”—though smarter folks could tell the “gems” looked like they came from a Michael’s craft store.

As it turned out, within months the church’s married pastor ran away with another woman, and locals learned that someone was dropping fake jewels through the church’s ceiling tiles. Busted!

I understand why we are vulnerable to these scenarios. We charismatics believe in the power of God, and we know He does miracles. In a world gone crazy, we want people to experience New Testament-style wonders. But how can we avoid the kind of embarrassment we just experienced in Dalton? Here are three simple rules:

1. **Pray for discernment.** When Jesus warned us about false prophets, he said we would “know them by their fruit” (Matt. 7:16). If we have God’s wisdom we will be able to distinguish the real from the fake. But it has become obvious that many Christians are lacking in discernment today. True miracles are never fabricated. When a blind man sees, that’s all the proof we need. True healings

can be documented. And we don't have to "help God" perform a miracle.

2. **Test the spirits.** Back in the early 2000s, a charismatic Brazilian woman claimed that supernatural gold dust was pouring from her Bible and from her head. John Arnott, leader of the Toronto Blessing revival movement, suspected that the woman was a fraud. So he had the gold tested in a lab, and the results showed it was plastic glitter. Arnott refused to allow the woman in his pulpit. And 1 John 4:1 tells us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God." It isn't a lack of faith to ask questions; in fact, we are commanded to ask questions!
3. **Look to see who is being glorified.** My experience has been that questionable movements and weird manifestations are usually associated with independent groups that lack accountability. In fact, renegade ministries sometimes resort to "funny business" in order to prove they have a special connection to God. Beware of lone rangers who claim special revelation. Churches that use gimmicks to say, "Look at us!" always implode.

In the case of the Dalton ministry, there were some very sweet, Bible-believing, Jesus-loving people who got caught up in the excitement of the oil-soaked Bible. Many visited out of curiosity. I believe some people who went to Flowing Oil for a touch from God probably got it because they went in genuine faith. I don't condemn them.

But I pray we learn our lesson and raise the bar, because our credibility is at stake here. Skeptics are watching, and right now they are having a field day.

Pastor Matt Evans of Rock Bridge Community Church in Dalton had been allowing Flowing Oil Ministries to rent the Wink Theater facility, but now the church has asked Pearce and his team to stop meeting there. Evans wrote in a blog this week

that this is a time to seek God, not to point fingers. He wrote: "Perhaps the wisest position for us to adopt at this time is one of caution, not cynicism; and prayer, not pessimism."

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## **6 Kinds of People God Won't Use**

About 22 years ago, I prayed the most dangerous prayer in the Bible while lying on the floor of a church in Florida. I repeated these words from Isaiah 6:8: "Here am I. Send me." Then I cringed. I knew God would "mess me up good" in order to use me to touch others for Christ. I wanted God to use me, but I was aware that we don't just go out and start a ministry on our own terms. God bends and breaks those who speak for Him. He requires full surrender. I had to let go of fears, adjust attitudes and change priorities.

It has become popular today to suggest that God can use anybody. It's true that He doesn't show favoritism based on race, age, gender, marital history, past failures or income status. Yet His standards have never been lowered; He only uses humble, obedient, consecrated followers.

Many Christians will never be useful in the kingdom because of mindsets or behaviors that limit the flow of the Holy Spirit or, as the apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:21a (KJV), "frustrate the grace of God." I don't ever want to frustrate His grace! If you want God to use you, make sure you don't fall into any of these categories:

**1. Driver's seat Christians.** Jesus is not just our Savior; He is the Lord. He wants to guide our decisions, direct our steps and overrule our selfish choices. There are many believers who enjoy the benefits of salvation, yet they never yield control to God. If you want Him to use you, you must slide over into the passenger seat and let Jesus drive.

**2. Armchair critics.** Some people roll up their sleeves and serve the Lord; others make it their business to analyze and pick apart everyone who is doing God's work. The devil is the accuser, so if you are accusing others, you are operating in the spirit of Lucifer. The Holy Spirit doesn't work through people who are bitter, angry or judgmental.

**3. Carnally minded Christians.** It has become fashionable today for believers to lower the standard of moral behavior to the point that anything goes. Don't be fooled. Just because more and more people are jumping on the bandwagon of sexual permissiveness doesn't mean God has rewritten His eternal Word. People who live in blatant sin cannot be instruments of the Holy Spirit. Second Timothy 2:21 (MEV) says clearly: "One who cleanses himself from these things will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, fit for the Master's use, and prepared for every good work." Our usefulness to God is based on whether we have submitted to the process of sanctification. Holiness is not an option.

**4. Church dropouts.** I won't win a popularity contest by saying this, but it's true: God does not use people who have turned away from the church. Today it is fashionable to bash the church; some people have even established "ministries" to lure Christians away from church and into an isolated spiritual wilderness. Most of these church-bashers are bitter because they had a bad experience with a pastor.

I have compassion for victims of spiritual abuse. But no one has the right to tear down the work of God just because a spiritual leader hurt him. The church is God's plan A, and He

does not have an alternative. If we are to be used by God, we must get connected to the church and learn to flow with God-ordained leadership.

**5. Timid cowards.** Paul told Timothy: “Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord” (2 Tim. 1:8a). Fear has the power to paralyze. All who surrender to the call of God must bravely defend the faith, risk their reputation and suffer rejection—and possible persecution. If you’re afraid to share the gospel, ask God for boldness.

**6. Lazy spectators.** Many Christians today think following God means clocking in for a 60-minute service. We read quick devotions on our smartphones and breathe short prayers during our morning commutes. But somewhere in all this 21st-century stress, we lost the meaning of discipleship. If you want God to use you, you must take His call seriously and become a focused student of His Word and a passionate prayer warrior.

The apostles of the first century declared: “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Half-hearted people never changed the world. You must be devoted, committed and passionate if you want to make maximum spiritual impact. {eoa}

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# Brazil Has Become a Global Hot Spot for Revival

Brazilians are known for being loud, fun-loving and passionate. That might be a stereotype, but it seems to match a spiritual trend that is rocking South America's largest country. Last weekend, an estimated 140,000 Brazilian young people made some serious noise when they jammed into three stadiums in the cities of Sao Paulo and Brasilia.

"Brazilians are the happiest people in the world. We party for anything!" said Felipe Amorim, 29, who was born in Brazil but has lived in Florida most of his life. He and his wife attended The Send in Sao Paulo last week because they heard that a huge spiritual revival is growing there. "Seeing people worshipping Jesus in Brazil was a huge joy for me," Amorim added.

The Send is a movement designed to mobilize the next generation for global missionary work. So many young people registered for the event at the Morumbi Stadium in Sao Paulo that a second venue had to be secured. Word on the street was that the event sold out faster than the U2 concert held in the same arena in 2017. Organizers said 1.7 million people watched The Send on the Portuguese livestream.

At the rally at the National Stadium the capital city of Brasilia, the nation's president, Jair Bonsonaro, showed up and announced that Brazil belongs to God. Young people cheered when he told them he is a believer in Jesus.

Although Brazil has struggled with socialism, poverty and political scandal for decades, there are noticeable positive trends these days. Churches are growing, and huge numbers of

youth are fueling a passionate revival movement that is spilling into the streets. President Bolsonaro, who was elected in 2018, is a cultural conservative whose policies have triggered a reviving economy as well as a crackdown on crime.

And even though well-known preachers like Daniel Kolenda, Francis Chan, Christine Caine, Todd White, Randy Clark and dozens of Brazilian leaders spoke at the event in Sao Paulo on February 8, Amorim said the growing revival in Brazil isn't about personalities. "There will not be one person or one ministry leading this revival," he said. "It's God leading it with ordinary people."

The Send underscores what mission researchers have noticed about Brazil for a decade. It is the fifth largest nation in the world and is already at least 22% evangelical Christian. It is the base for hundreds of mission organizations. And leaders in Brazil believe they will soon surpass the United States as the world's leading missionary sending nation in the 21st century.

Josh Lindquist, a 35-year-old revivalist from Minnesota, has made many trips to Brazil and preaches often in conferences there. He says The Send Brazil was three times larger than the previous event held in Orlando, Florida, a year ago—and that the volume was much louder.

"When the rain started falling, the youth started dancing, and you could literally feel the stadium shaking," Lindquist said. "When the Brazilians worship, there is not a dry eye in the place. They worship Jesus stronger than football fans cheer for their teams."

Lindquist, who leads a ministry called Global Revival Harvest, says Brazil's revival has some unique characteristics, including:

**Deep, heartfelt worship.** "The songs they sing in Brazil are

like anthems, they capture your heart. And people get saved just from listening to the music,” Lindquist says. Popular Brazilian worship artist Ana Paula has led worship for crowds of up to 2 million people.

**–Street evangelism is often led by youth.** One well-known movement known as Ceu Na Terra (Heaven on Earth) is transforming whole neighborhoods. Youth venture into the streets to preach, worship and pray for people, and they even take their message inside nightclubs. “A lot of the nightclubs have become places of Bible study and prayer,” Lindquist said.

**–Baptists are fully open to the Holy Spirit.** In Brazil, “Baptical” is a norm. Baptists who embrace the gifts of the Holy Spirit are known as “renewed Baptists”—and their churches have grown exponentially. One of the most famous, Lagoinha Baptist in Belo Horizonte, has grown to 82,000 members and now has branch churches in dozens of cities in Brazil, Europe and the United States.

At the end of The Send Brazil, attendees took off their shoes and raised them to heaven, pledging before God in their bare feet that they will take the gospel to the nations. This, Lindquist said, is the reason Brazil will be a spiritual powerhouse in the coming years.

“The fire of the Holy Spirit was already burning here,” Lindquist said. “God sent The Send to encourage the Brazilians to export that fire. Brazil will be a key nation for global missions. It is one of the greatest global hot spots on earth.” {eoa}

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# Jesus Is Transforming Salvadoran Gang Members

This Monday, I stood in front of 600 male inmates at a prison in Izalco, El Salvador. The men were dressed in white T-shirts and white drawstring pants, and many of them sported tattoos on their faces and necks. All the men were members of violent gangs when they were incarcerated. About 20% of them were affiliated with the MS-13 gang—a group known for horrific attacks on women, children and police officers.

Yet I felt no fear as I looked out over the crowd and shared a message from Luke 15 about the prodigal son. Most of the men were carrying Bibles, and when I announced my text, they immediately turned to the passage. I could hear them yell, “Amen,” or “Gloria a Dios,” when I stressed an important point. And they clapped and cheered when I reminded them that the kosher Jewish father in the story welcomed his wayward son home even though the boy smelled like pigs.

Almost every prisoner in this huge group became a Christian after arriving at the Izalco prison. Two churches now operate inside the facility, pastored by men who were once tough criminals. All the men now gather for Bible study every day, they hold prayer and fasting vigils, and they are helping each other to grow spiritually.

When the men worshipped on Monday, six guys used plastic paint tubs for drums while an inmate with a huge smile led the praise choruses. The men sang louder and with more passion than I’ve witnessed in most churches in the outside world.

I told the inmates: “¡Jesucristo vive dentro de esta prisión!” (“Jesus Christ lives inside this prison!”) The men screamed with approval.

“Our government is encouraging this movement,” says Oscar

David Benavides, director of the prison. He says in 2016 he was allowed to encourage evangelism among inmates. When men experienced conversions, he intentionally moved them into buildings where there were non-Christian inmates.

Faith was never forced on anyone, but more and more men began to find Jesus in a chain reaction of grace. The new converts changed dramatically. They were no longer angry and depressed. They became cooperative and friendly. Their frowns turned to smiles.

Today, El Salvador's government leaders see evidence that Christianity is good for violent offenders.

No serious crimes have occurred inside the Izalco facility since the prison revival began. The inmates treat each other with respect, even though they were affiliated with rival gangs. "The transformation is an obvious miracle," Benavides says.

This was certainly obvious to me as I walked through the crowd and shook hands with the guys after my message. Most of them wanted to give me a hug. They all had big smiles. All were eager to say, "Dios le bendiga," or "God bless you," when I looked their way.

"Some of these men participated in massacres or other forms of gang violence," Benavides told me. "But today they have been changed by the grace of God."

I felt I was witnessing a true miracle as I looked into the eyes of these men, some of whom may have participated in massacres or beheadings a few years ago. The feared MS-13 gang has even been responsible for setting fire to public buses with people inside them. Salvadoran gang members who traveled to the United States have also spread terror within our borders.

I told the men in Izalco that I was honored to be with them.

“There are many people in my country who are afraid of you,” I said. “But I wish they could see what I am seeing today.”

They cheered again as the drummers pounded on the plastic tubs.

Here in the United States, we are skittish about mixing government and religion. We don’t want prayer in schools. We don’t want the Bible to influence public policy.

And yet our prisons are so dangerous they are like hell on earth. A report released last year by *The New Republic* said 428 inmates died in Florida’s prisons in 2017, hundreds have died in prisons in Oregon and Washington since 2008, and the rate of prisoner-on-prisoner violence has doubled in Alabama in the past five years.

I’m not going to hold my breath until America’s prison officials try El Salvador’s unusual method of reform. But why wouldn’t we? In this tiny Central American nation—the only country in the world named after Jesus Christ—a true miracle has happened. We are foolish if we ignore it.

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## **Pastor Lawan Andimi Is Dead—Pray for God’s Intervention**

Pastor Lawan Andimi was a peace-loving man. He was affiliated with the Church of the Brethren in northern Nigeria, and he served as chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria in

his local district in Adamawa State. But a few weeks ago the soft-spoken church leader was abducted by Islamic militants affiliated with the ruthless Boko Haram terrorist group.

A few days later Andimi appeared in a video that was widely distributed inside and outside Nigeria. In his message he asked church and government leaders to negotiate his release. But he also said that he was prepared to die if necessary.

On Jan. 20 he was beheaded by his captors. Sources said Andimi refused to renounce his faith in Jesus.

He paid the ultimate price.

Nigeria's president, Muhammadu Buhari, denounced the murder as "cruel, inhuman and deliberately provocative," according to *The New York Times*. But press releases will not stop the killings. Just days after Andimi's death, another Islamic terrorist group in a different region of northern Nigeria killed nine Christians and two other captives. The group released a video showing a hooded child, probably 9 years old, executing a Christian man with a pistol.

What can we do about this senseless violence? It seems so far removed from our isolated world. Most Americans are too preoccupied with the Super Bowl or the Oscars to care about religious violence on the other side of the world. But those of us who follow Christ cannot remain passive when our brothers and sisters are suffering.

On the political side, we can demand action. Write your senators and representatives in Washington and ask them to pressure Nigeria to end Boko Haram's reign of terror. Islamic militants are already spreading their influence beyond Nigeria into neighboring countries, and America must stand for religious freedom and demand that Mr. Buhari's government take military action against the terrorist groups.

You can also pray during this time of emergency. The Christian

Association of Nigeria has called for three days of prayer and fasting beginning this Friday, Jan. 31 to Feb. 2. Never underestimate the power of united prayer. Gather your church together to pray for all believers living in nations where Christians are persecuted.

Here are six biblical ways you can pray:

1. **Pray for a bold witness of the gospel in the midst of persecution.** Persecution was a reality in the New Testament church, but it did not stop the early disciples from spreading the gospel. After Peter and John were arrested and told to stop preaching, they announced: "We cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Pray that all persecuted Christians will not be intimidated or silenced by acts of terror.
2. **Pray for supernatural miracles to confirm the gospel.** When the early church faced opposition, they prayed not only for boldness, but also for a display of God's power. They prayed in unity in Acts 4:29-30: "Now, Lord, look on their threats and grant that Your servants may speak Your word with great boldness, by stretching out Your hand to heal and that signs and wonders may be performed in the name of Your holy Son Jesus." Pray that God will bare His arm and show the world that He is real, especially to militant Muslims who don't know the Savior.
3. **Pray that the seed of the martyrs will produce a harvest of converts.** When an angry crowd stoned Stephen, the first martyr of the early church, he cried out on his knees: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60). His death was tragic, but it was not in vain. A great outpouring of the Holy Spirit followed his martyrdom. When a born-again Christian gives his or her life for Jesus, God takes note and responds. This could

be the greatest hour of spiritual awakening in Africa, the Middle East and other regions where believers are in danger.

4. **Pray for heavy conviction to fall on those who persecute the church.** Saul was bent on arresting and killing the early disciples, and he watched as Stephen was martyred. Yet shortly after Saul launched his terror campaign, he fell on his face on the Damascus road and was dramatically converted (see Acts 9:3-4). This same miracle can happen today to leaders of ISIS. Don't limit God's power—and don't pray vindictive prayers of judgment on these people. Pray that the most militant persecutors of the church will have a head-on collision with the Son of God.
5. **Pray for angelic protection and intervention.** During one wave of persecution against the New Testament church, an angel appeared in Peter's prison cell, woke him up and caused his chains to fall off (see Acts 12:7). Later, after King Herod refused to stop his rule of terror, an angel struck him dead (see 12:23). The Bible does not say the church prayed for Herod's death; we should never pray with a vengeful spirit, but we should leave room for the wrath of God when mercy runs out.
6. **Pray that the global Christian community will work for peace.** We cannot just sit back and watch our brothers and sisters being beheaded for their faith while we enjoy our First World comforts. We must be in solidarity with them, not only in prayer but also in action. We should actively support government and church leaders who are working behind the scenes for reconciliation, humanitarian aid and protection for the victims of injustice.

Our response to this wave of terror cannot be fear—or hatred. Don't just curse the darkness. Be proactive by praying

fervently. Ask God to unleash a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will not only bring peace-loving Muslims to Christ, but also bloodthirsty militants who are sharpening their knives for the next attack.

You can watch Pastor Andimi's last recorded words here in this video, which was released by Boko Haram on Jan. 2, 2020, in their effort to demand a ransom for his life. Please pray for his wife and family who continue to grieve this tragic loss.

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## **Young Christians Can Smell a Fake a Mile Away**

I spent this past weekend with a group of younger guys from the Washington, D.C. area. Most of them were in their mid- to late 20s and early 30s—the age of my own kids. All but two of them were single. And even though I am twice their age they loved being with me. I've been texting several of them since our three-day retreat.

There is no generation gap between us. We genuinely enjoyed being together—whether we were worshipping the Lord, building a bonfire, sharing meals or staying up late and talking about their biggest struggles.

I shared from the Bible in several teaching sessions, but after the messages I asked each young man to get in the “hot seat” so we could pray for him. Some of the guys were filled with the Holy Spirit. Others broke free from bad habits.

Others worked up the courage to begin considering marriage.

People today often complain that the younger generation is leaving the church. I can't deny statistics. But everywhere I go I find passionate young adults who want to grow spiritually. All the men I spent time with last weekend are leaders at Overflow City Church, a congregation that was planted last year in the D.C. suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland. More than 90% of the church's members are either university students or young professionals.

I've learned so much from being around young Christians like the ones I met at Overflow. I've learned that younger believers want more of God, but they are savvy enough to smell counterfeits. If you want to draw more young adults into a deeper experience with the Holy Spirit, consider these guidelines:

1. **Don't water it down.** Some churches are so afraid of a youth service going overboard that they keep the emergency brake on at all times and never risk letting the Holy Spirit take over. Today's young people don't want to play it safe. Invite them to the deep end of God's river and trust Him to work in their lives. Explain what the baptism of the Holy Spirit is, tell your own testimony and then invite them to pray. Sometimes it is the youth who are more open to Pentecost. Don't avoid it!
2. **Don't put on a show.** Nothing turns off kids faster than a celebrity minister who is trying to impress people with his fake preacher voice and look-at-me attitude. Today's youth can see through goofy mannerisms and hyper-religious terminology. If you want to introduce youth to the power of the Holy Spirit, talk in a normal voice and be yourself. You don't have to be a cool hipster to attract a younger audience. Just get out of the way and let God move.
3. **Demonstrate the real power.** It's not enough to talk

about prophecy, healing or the word of knowledge. Let people see the gifts of the Holy Spirit in action. When youth see the power of God demonstrated, they are ruined forever. They want it! And when you pray for people, don't wave your coat, push people to the floor or manipulate people to make them think you are God's man or woman of faith. Be humble and act normal.

4. **Invite questions and offer answers.** In many churches the preacher delivers a sermon and then disappears behind the stage. He lectures; the people nod. Those days are over. Today's generation wants to interact. They want to have lunch or coffee with you. Don't be afraid of questions, and be willing to admit mistakes. Open your life. They will respect you more if you take off your mask and invite a two-way conversation.
5. **Empower them to lead.** I've been doing a series of leadership events for young men and women for 10 years now. Last year I gave the pulpit to a 23-year-old guy I've mentored, and he brought a heartfelt message about evangelism. One reason today's youth haven't experienced the Holy Spirit's power is that we've never given them the car keys and let them drive.
6. **Pour on the love.** Youth today want relationships, and if you don't make yourself available as a mentor and friend they won't be as willing to test the deep waters of the Spirit with you. Don't be mechanical. If you pray with them, cry with them and hug them they will also let you confront them. And don't make everything about the intense Holy Ghost meeting; sometimes the most genuine spiritual moment of the night will be when you share a pizza afterward.

Perhaps one reason we've lost touch with the younger generation is that we didn't invite them to experience the raw power of God. Maybe we should ditch some of our scripted programs, strobe lights and fog machines, and allow the Spirit to create a real wow factor that is not manufactured by a

human being. I believe that's what youth today are waiting for. {eoa}

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# **Nigeria's Persecuted Christians Are Begging Us for Help**

Nigeria is like a second home to me. I've been there 10 times.

I've feasted on goat and jollaf rice in Port Harcourt, danced for hours with Christians in Akure and Abuja, and joked with friends about the horrible traffic jams in Lagos. My Nigerian brothers and sisters are some of the most passionate believers on planet Earth.

Yet today their faith is under severe attack, and the world doesn't seem to care.

So many Christians have been killed in recent months in northern Nigeria that international humanitarian groups have labeled the situation a genocide. But you will rarely hear anything about this on Western news broadcasts.

More than 1,000 Nigerian Christians were killed in 2019 by Muslim extremists from the Fulani tribe, according to the Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust. The group estimates that there have been 6,000 Christians killed since 2015 and up to 12,000 displaced from their homes. The atrocities happened mainly in Plateau, Kaduna and Taraba states in the north.

“Most Christians in Nigeria think there is a plot to Islamacize Nigeria,” says my friend Kelechi Okengwu, who studied at the University of Bradford in England and now serves churches in eastern Nigeria and lectures on security issues. He says Nigeria’s President Muhammadu Buhari, who is Muslim, has entrusted all security forces into the hands of northern Muslims. And Buhari is doing little to respond to the violence.

In addition, Okengwu says, the chief justice of Nigeria, Ibrahim Muhammad, in December called for an amendment to the constitution to accommodate sharia law—a step that violates basic principles of a secular state.

Recent attacks by the Fulani herdsmen, as well as violent kidnappings and church-burnings by Boko Haram, an Islamic terrorist group, have made Nigeria one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a Christian. According to Open Doors, Nigeria has the 12th-worst persecution of Christians on the planet. Christians have been shot as well as burned to death.

In a video made in 2018, a pastor named Ezekiel Dachomo, from the Church of Christ in Nigeria, issued an urgent plea that has been widely ignored, even though the video was verified and is still circulating. Dachomo begged for international help after a pastor and his wife and children were slaughtered by the Fulanis. He said, in part: “America, please stand for us. We are dying. Please, allow us to survive. We have nobody. Only God in heaven can stand for us. Please, I am begging you. ... We are now ready to do [our] last prayers, since an Islamic agenda is taking over the nation.”

Last week, I interviewed Rev. Tunde Bolanta, a Pentecostal pastor who planted Restoration Bible Church in Kaduna, Nigeria, in 1987. He is begging Western believers to pray for the dire situation.

Here are portions of that interview.

**1. Muslims have been persecuting Christians in the north of Nigeria for many years. Is it getting more intense now?**

**Rev. Bolanta:** "Persecution is more intense because both Boko Haram terrorists and Fulani herdsmen are invading villages. Churches have been burned, Christians have been killed, women have been raped, farmlands have been burned and many Christians have been displaced from their ancestral homes. The kidnapping of pastors and Christians has become a business. The attackers demand huge ransoms, thereby draining resources from the Christian community. Some victims have even been killed after the ransom was paid."

**2. Do you personally know Christians who have been killed or kidnapped by Boko Haram?**

**Rev. Bolanta:** "We hear stories of killings and kidnappings of Christians on a daily basis. Pastor Isaac Inua in Adamawa state was shot five times and killed in front of his wife by Boko Haram gunmen. Recently, an 8-year-old girl named Hannah was kidnapped when Fulani herdsmen broke into her house at Juji village near Kaduna. Many Christians prayed for her release. After 12 days, she was released after a ransom was paid. Some are not so lucky."

**3. What is the mood of Christians in northern Nigeria?**

**Rev. Bolanta:** "Christians in the north feel abandoned. They are scared. Many are moving away. They feel abandoned by the Western world."

**4. How do Nigerian Christians view President Trump and the political situation in the United States?**

**Rev. Bolanta:** "Many Christians in Nigeria prayed for President Trump to win in 2016 because they see him as a leader who believes in biblical values. President Trump is viewed as a courageous and fearless leader who lives by conviction. Many Christians in Nigeria are praying that he will not be

impeached because they see him as a man sent by God to help them.”

## **5. How can Christians in the West pray for Nigeria?**

**Rev. Bolanta:** “Pray that our faith would not fail. Pray that help will come to counter the terrorists. Pray for provision, since many can no longer farm because their villages or their farmlands have been occupied by invaders. Pray that God will comfort all those who mourn in Zion. Many are mourning the loss of loved ones and family.”

This violence continues in 2020. In early January, Pastor Lawan Andimi, a leader of the Christian Association of Nigeria, was kidnapped by Boko Haram forces near Nigeria’s border with Cameroon. In a video that surfaced a few days later, he calmly says his captors are treating him respectfully.

“By the grace of God, I will be together with my wife, children and colleagues,” Andimi says in his taped message. “And if the opportunity has not been granted, then maybe it is the will of God.” So far, no one had heard any news about the pastor’s whereabouts—and local Christians are urging believers worldwide to pray for him. {eoa}

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# **5 Things Most People Don’t Know About Iran**

The world watched on Monday as Iranians shouted “Death to

America!" in the streets of Tehran. A crowd of at least 1 million people gathered for the funeral of Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Suleimani, who was killed on Jan. 3 by American forces. The angry protesters burned American flags and called for the assassination of President Trump while Suleimani's daughter, Zeinab, called for revenge.

"The families of the American soldiers ... will spend their days waiting for the death of their children," she vowed at the funeral.

Here at home, Americans are divided on the killing of the Iranian general. Democrats have criticized Trump's decision to target Suleimani, denouncing the military action as reckless. Republicans say Suleimani was a vicious war criminal who engineered the killings of thousands since he began his career in 1997 as a terrorist mastermind. Pentagon leaders say Suleimani was plotting imminent attacks before he was killed last week in a U.S. airstrike on Baghdad.

So whom do we believe? I turned to Masih Alinejad, an Iranian journalist and women's rights advocate, who offered a levelheaded opinion in her article in the *Washington Post* on Jan. 6. "I have one piece of advice," Alinejad wrote. "Don't take what you're seeing at face value."

The truth is that we aren't getting the whole picture from the mainstream media. Here are five things you need to know about the Iranian situation:

1. **There is massive disapproval of the Muslim leadership inside Iran.** We all saw the crowds at Monday's funeral in Tehran. But Iran doesn't want you to know that a huge protest movement has been rocking the country for years. Last November thousands marched in the streets to demand the removal of Iran's clerical rule. Reuters said Iranian security forces killed more than 1,500 people during that incident.

The regime of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, works hard to keep people from thinking for themselves. After last November's protests, the government shut down the internet for five days. Many journalists and bloggers have been jailed or killed for the crime of "insulting" Khamenei. Yet in spite of threats, brave Iranians still take to the streets to call for an end to tyranny.

- 2. Iranians living in America are celebrating the demise of Gen. Suleimani.** Los Angeles is home to 300,000 Iranian-Americans—many of whom came to this country when the Shah of Iran was deposed in 1979. But you will not hear many of these new Americans defending Gen. Suleimani. Many of them rejoiced at the news of his death because they were familiar with his bloody record.

Nasser Sharif, president of the California Society for Democracy in Iran, calls Suleimani a "murderer of Iranians, Syrians and American soldiers in Iraq." He also told *The Los Angeles Times* this week that his contacts in Iran are thrilled that Suleimani was killed. "The Iranian regime is very weak and vulnerable and desperate," he said. "The regime is very unpopular among the public and the young generation."

- 3. Mosques are empty all across Iran.** For several years journalists have been reporting that mosque attendance in Iran has dwindled. This is because the typical Iranian has rejected the tyranny of the ayatollahs. Young people are sick of the harsh state control, the public floggings for criminals and the strict dress requirements. Even as far back as 2015, a reporter from *The Telegraph* said hardly anyone attended Friday prayers at the largest mosque near the University of Tehran.

Inflation is high and jobs are scarce in Iran. Younger Iranians see the government as the problem. Mania Filum, who is 27, said educated Iranians are seeking opportunities to leave the country. "Everybody plans to win funds for PhDs and

leave Iran," she said. Farshid Andikjou, a 27-year-old former engineer, told *The Los Angeles Times* that he is studying English so he can get a job overseas. "Give me a good reason to stay in my country," he added.

4. **There is a vast spiritual awakening taking place in Iran today.** Christians inside Iran say there is an unprecedented level of interest in the gospel. People are listening to Christian broadcasting and discreetly asking for prayer through secure apps. Mission groups working with Iranian churches say they often can't provide enough Bibles or resources for new believers, because the number is growing.

*Operation World* continues to list Iran as having the fastest-growing evangelical church in the world. Underground churches are flourishing, even though the government arrests pastors and harasses believers. And in a new documentary about the Iranian church, *Sheep Among Wolves II*, an unidentified Iranian pastor says: "What if I told you no one follows Islam inside of Iran? Would you believe me? This is exactly what is happening inside of Iran. God is moving powerfully inside of Iran."

5. **Iran plays a huge prophetic role in the Bible.** It would be tragic if we looked at Iran simply as an enemy nation—especially when considering the role it has played in the history of our faith. It is the land where Daniel lived and prophesied. It is the place where Esther and Mordecai worked and prayed to save the Jews from genocide. It is where God's people were preserved during 70 years of judgment—and where King Cyrus decreed that they could go back to their homeland. In fact, Cyrus' tomb is in the Iranian city of Pasargadae.

All these facts should be considered as we pray for Iran in this tense moment. First Timothy 2:2 calls us to pray "for kings and for all who are in authority, that we may lead a

quiet and peaceful life in all godliness and honesty.” Pray for the uprooting of terrorism. Pray for protection for Iran’s persecuted church. Pray that spiritual revival will spread. Pray for peace and freedom in this ancient land. {eoa}

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## **The Single Most Important Habit You Need in 2020**

When I was a teenager, my mentor, Barry, taught me to have a daily devotional time with God. This has become the single most important habit in my life, and I’m convinced no one can grow as a Christian without it.

I memorized Proverbs 8:34 when I was just 18: “Blessed is the man who hears me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors.” I started getting up early and praying in my college dorm room. I discovered that God promises a blessing to those who spend time with Him! More than 40 years later I’m still setting aside that special time with God.

But how do you structure a daily quiet time in today’s overscheduled culture? Many Christians today say they are way too busy to set aside time to pray and read the Bible. Instead, they multi-task their devotional lives by listening to Christian podcasts while commuting to work or praying under their breath while showering or brushing their teeth.

There’s nothing wrong with doing those things, but if you never set aside time to focus wholeheartedly on prayer or the Bible, your relationship with God will feel cluttered and

superficial. It's not too late to develop new habits. Here are a few ways you can make your time with God richer and more intimate.

**Set a regular time for your "date" with God.** There is no rule about when to pray. Some people prefer mornings; others find prayer easier in the evening hours. Devotional time works better for me early in the morning, before life's pressures crowd my time. Once you develop your unique habit, and you realize how much you benefit from it, you'll find you simply can't live without time with God.

**Choose a special place that gives you privacy.** Jesus reminded us that seclusion is a secret to effective prayer. He said: "But you, when you pray, enter your closet, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matt. 6:6a). This doesn't mean you can't pray while driving to work. But you need a quiet place in order to focus. My favorite chair in my study at home is where I'm most centered.

**Turn off your phone.** Would you talk to friends, reply to texts or answer emails during a date with your spouse? Not unless you trivialize that relationship. The same principle applies when you spend time with the Lord. We need to reclaim the art of undistracted devotion.

I love my phone, but I've found it necessary to silence it during my times with God. And if you use your phone to read the Bible, consider switching to an old-fashioned hard copy of the Scriptures. The temptation to check messages or post Instagram photos can waste time and ruin your devotional life.

**Don't put yourself under pressure.** You don't have to read 50 chapters of the Bible or pray three hours. Pace yourself. Be realistic and take small steps. If you have not been seeking the Lord regularly, start by reading a chapter a day in the Bible and praying for 15 minutes. Eventually you will want more. It is better to be a tortoise than a hare. The key is to

be consistent.

**Learn to “chew” the Bible.** One of the simplest ways to study the Bible is to read one book at a time (such as Romans or Isaiah) and slowly digest each verse. The biblical word “meditate” means “to chew,” as a cow chews its cud over and over. The more you read a passage, the more “juice” you squeeze out of it!

**Don’t just read; listen for God’s voice.** Some people have complained to me, “I just never hear God speaking.” Yet when I ask if they read the Bible regularly, they say they’re too busy. God wants to speak directly to us through the pages of His Word.

When you read Scripture with a prayerful heart, God can cause a verse to jump off the page as a direct, personal message. British preacher Charles Spurgeon recognized this years ago when he wrote: “When I have been in trouble, I have read the Bible until a text has seemed to stand out of the Book, and salute me, saying, ‘I was written specially for you.’”

**Use a prayer list.** Many Christians think prayer is just about getting their own needs met. But Jesus calls us to a deeper place of sacrifice by inviting us to pray for others. I love what Samuel told the people of Israel when they were in trouble. He said: “Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you” (1 Sam. 12:23).

Years ago, I started the habit of praying for certain people God had put in my life. Today, I have a long list of people I pray for regularly. Pouring my heart out in prayer for them has become one of the most fulfilling spiritual disciplines I engage in. During 2019 I saw so many answers to prayer: Babies were conceived, churches were planted, single people found spouses, prodigals came home and many of my friends found healing or financial breakthrough in response to prayer.

The apostle Paul feared that the Corinthians might be “led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3, NASB). Our media-saturated culture gives us a million ways to occupy our time, but simple devotion remains the antidote to all distraction. As you step into 2020, reset your priorities and make it your goal to spend time with God.