

Are You Really a Christian If You Don't Face Persecution?

Asia Bibi was sentenced to death over a cup of water. A Pakistani Christian and mother of five, she's been in prison since 2009, ordered to be hanged for blasphemy under Pakistan's extremist Islamic laws. She didn't murder anyone or steal anything. Instead, the farmer's daughter simply stopped to draw a cup of water from a well after picking fruit in the fields on a hot June day. But when a co-worker yelled "Blasphemy!" and charged her with contaminating the Muslim-owned well because she's a Christian, Asia's life instantly changed. Ridiculed for her faith, days later she was beaten unconscious by a mob, dragged before a village imam and thrown in jail.

Since then, Asia has become a global symbol for religious persecution, even garnering the support of Pope Benedict XVI and Hillary Clinton. But this means little to her husband and family, all of whom have been forced into hiding while waiting for Asia's appeal to be heard in court. Meanwhile, two Pakistani government officials who came to her defense have been murdered. All because she refused to renounce her faith in Jesus.

Do we in the American church have any idea what this would be like? Or are we so removed from such suffering that we've forgotten the roots of our faith?

I'll admit that I can easily become numb to this kind of persecution. It's not that my heart is hardened and I'm immune to stories of persecuted believers. No, I still cry and ache and intercede for my brothers and sisters around the world each time I hear of them being ripped from their families, raped, robbed, burned, beaten or slaughtered.

The problem is that I'm part of the mass of American believers who have become so comfortable, fat and complacent with our First Amendment right to openly profess Jesus that we've lost touch with our own calling to be persecuted.

Jesus said, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake" (Matt. 5:11). Notice He said *when* they persecute you, not *if*. Jesus continues this notion with a more direct promise in John 15:20: "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." And in 2 Timothy 3:12, the promise is spelled out again: "All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution."

If you follow Christ, you *will be* persecuted. Period. So what happens if we're not being persecuted now? Does that mean we're not really following Christ?

That's the question I've wrestled with in recent years as I've heard hundreds of stories of how the Holy Spirit is moving powerfully in places where the church is persecuted. At the same time, I've heard countless Christians lament the spiritual decline of America. Some declare we've been judged, some say we're being judged, and yet others believe we can still turn things around if we follow the 2 Chronicles 7:14 blueprint. But what if all three are not only simultaneously true, they're also inherently connected to Jesus' promise to us of persecution?

History proves that the church thrives amid persecution. Despite each of the disciples' gruesome executions (minus John, who was still persecuted), the church spread like wildfire. Fast-forward to the Martyr Period (a.d. 100–a.d. 314), when tens of thousands of believers—men, women and children—were fed to animals, torn apart, tortured, crucified and burned at the stake, and still the church flourished.

Even here in America, we can't forget that persecution was the

bedrock of our nation's very existence. The pilgrims fled Europe to escape persecution and gain the freedom to worship Jesus as they desired.

Please understand, I'm not asking anyone to go agitate an unbeliever to the point that he or she starts "persecuting" you—just so you can prove that you're truly following Christ. That's silly.

But I am challenging us to once again lay hold of the promise Jesus gave us and relish its meaning—particularly in the context of our current freedom. Because after decades of living in relative luxury, believers are beginning to face more animosity from an increasingly godless culture. America's intolerance for Christians is growing. Yet history—and even God's current move around the world—proves that's a good thing.

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