

# Suffering for Their Faith

One of the world's leading defenders of the suffering church calls Charisma's readers to identify with our persecuted brothers and sisters.

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"We feel at times as if we are all alone in our struggle." I heard those words from the pastor of a small, oppressed underground church in Warsaw, Poland, in 1955. It was my first trip behind the Iron Curtain. At the time I didn't know there was a persecuted church. Little did I realize then how often I would hear that sentiment expressed in various ways throughout the next 46 years of ministry in restricted-access areas.

As you read this, for an estimated 200 million Christians, persecution is still the order of the day. Countless other believers face injustices that most of us have never even thought about, much less experienced.

Shageldy Atakov, 38, a jailed Christian in Turkmenistan, told his wife in early February that he did not expect to survive the brutal treatment he was suffering in a labor camp. He could barely walk and frequently lost consciousness. A Muslim convert to Christ, Atakov had become too effective in his ministry to the ethnic Turkmen population, which is almost exclusively Muslim. He was jailed on trumped-up charges.

In Colombia, the ongoing internal war has displaced 2 million people, 75 percent of whom are women and children. The capital city of Bogota bulges at the seams with about 1,000 new refugees arriving daily. Many are Christians targeted by the various warring factions because, in their loyalty to Christ, they refused to choose sides.

I'm thankful that Christians in the West are becoming aware of these atrocities. But living on an island of liberty and prosperity has silenced us. We want to believe that the whole world is like ours. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Why are we so tolerant of regimes and religions that are so intolerant themselves? We hear about forced Islamization in Sudan and Indonesia and about other crimes against our brethren, yet we do not interfere. Is it because of our economic interests? Then we're hypocrites. As soon as it costs us something, we go silent.

And we have been silent for much too long! Even worse, our silence has caused a breach in the body of Christ. Have we forgotten 1 Corinthians 12:26? "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (NKJV).

If we cannot feel the suffering, maybe we should ask ourselves if we really are part of the body of Christ. The self-destructive wave of wealth and prosperity that threatens to destroy the evangelical movement can only be withstood by a far deeper identification with the persecuted church. We can measure our relationship with God by the oneness we feel with those who suffer for His name.

Look at your Bible. Both Moses and Paul were strong intercessors and leaders. Both had a faith and a love that knew no limits: They were willing to be blotted out of the Book of Life if only their people would be saved! Moses would not have come to that place had he not identified with the suffering of Christ (see Heb. 11:26).

Both prayed a strong prayer that greatly influenced their life and ministry: "That I may know You" (see Ex. 33:13 and Phil. 3:10). Paul, who had personal knowledge of the persecuted church, linked his request to the fellowship of Jesus' suffering. We seem to prefer leaving that part out, ending our prayer instead with the more convenient "and the power of His resurrection" (see Phil. 3:10).

But we will see no demonstration of the power of Jesus' resurrection unless it is coupled with reaching the suffering church. The persecuted church cannot survive without us, nor can we survive without them. The breach in the body of Christ must be healed for His sake and for the kingdom of God.

In many ways we are not that different. As an unregistered house church leader in China said recently, "The biggest problem in China today is not that too few Chinese are becoming Christians, but that too few new Christians are becoming mature Christians!"

It reminds me of the story of the chicken and the pig: "We can do something to help the problem of world hunger," the chicken told the pig. "You and I could feed them! I will provide the eggs. You can provide the bacon."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," the pig replied. "For you that would be a me that would be total sacrifice."

Has Christianity failed? Of course not. I say it has not yet been tried, even in the so-called "Christian nations." We must move from "making a contribution" to "total sacrifice." And in our sacrifice we must remember that God has the last word, not the persecutor.

My prayer is that you will identify with the persecuted church. Remember Shageldy Atakov in that prison cell in Turkmenistan. Pray for Christian families in Colombia who have been forced from their homes because they refuse to deny Christ.

Write to political leaders on behalf of believers being forced to convert to Islam in Sudan and Indonesia. Support strong ministries in these difficult areas. Go and encourage those who suffer for their faith.

Millions of persecuted Christians still feel as if they are alone in their struggles. Like us, they desire peace. But there will be no peace without justice, and justice will only come for those who suffer for Christ when we stand with them.

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