What is the first thought that crosses your mind when you wake each day? Is it “Another day another dollar,” or maybe “the Lord’s mercies are new every morning?” Or how about this, “Will this be the day I die? Will they come again, who will care for my children if I die today? Oh Lord watch over our family today!”

These words, or words very similar to them, cross the minds of millions of Christians when they wake up every morning in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, China, Indonesia, and Africa where they are relentlessly persecuted for their faith.

It is sometimes hard for us as American Christians to realize the extent of persecution that is going on in this world when every Sunday, we gather together for worship, joining with other believers and in public places to praise and honor our Lord but, for millions of other Christians throughout the world, this is only a dream. When they worship, they have to come together in secret, in small numbers to avoid the spying eyes of the Government. They gather together in hidden places because they face the constant threat of arrest and persecution for their faith.

Life is good here, isn’t it? So much so that it is easy to become so distracted by business of life and our own needs that we forget to recognize the plight of our brothers and sisters who live in restricted nations hostile to Christianity. We are quick to cry “Persecution” when the federal district courts rule the National Day of Prayer unconstitutional, attempt to take away our non-profit deductions or our local governments refuse to rezone an area to allow a church to expand. We really have no idea what true persecution is, at least not yet.

This morning, I want to look into the book of Revelation at the church of Smyrna and spend some time thinking about our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in constant threat for their faith. Then I would like to close with special time of prayer for them.

I. THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Mark Seddon, a journalist for Britain’s Independent newspaper stated, "We are witnessing a new age of Christian persecution."

Last year in 2014 over 200 million Christians faced some form of discrimination or persecution because of their faith. According to the International Society for Human Rights, (a secular group with members in 38 states worldwide) 80 per cent of all acts of religious persecution in the world today are directed at Christians.

The Pew Research Center says that hostility to religion reached a new high in 2012, when Christians faced some form of discrimination in 139 countries, almost three-quarters of the world’s nations. More Christians are being persecuted and martyred for their faith right now than at any time in the history of the world.

Persecution is nothing new in the Christian church. We read about it first in the Book of Acts, as the Jews persecuted the followers of Jesus and forced them to relocate from Jerusalem to Antioch. We read about it in the letters of Paul and John and Peter and here in Revelation in Christ’s letter to the church at Smyrna.
Before we look at this letter, let me give you a little background on the city of Smyrna. Smyrna was known as the crown of Asia, the commercial center of Asia Minor and a major stop on trade route between Persia and India and Rome. Smyrna was a seaport city about 35 miles north of Ephesus. Unlike Ephesus it still flourishes today and is called Izmir, Turkey.

It was a very wealthy city that relied heavily on its trade with Rome; as a result, it was devoted to the emperor. Most of the people in Smyrna viewed the Roman emperor as a god and worshiped him in along with a countless other gods of the various cultures gathered there.

At the time this letter was written, the Christians in Smyrna were starting to suffer from external persecution, both from those who worshiped the Roman emperor and from Jews who were opposed to the sect called “The Way.” Remember at this time, Christians were considered to be pagans for their rejection of the emperor’s deity.

This letter written to the church at Smyrna stands as instruction and inspiration to those suffering for their faith and to the persecuted church as a whole throughout the ages.

“The Greek word translated ‘Smyrna’ was used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew word for myrrh, a resinous substance used as a perfume for the living and the dead. Its association with death perfectly pictures [this] suffering church at Smyrna. Like myrrh, produced by crushing a fragrant plant, the church at Smyrna, crushed by persecution, gave off a fragrant aroma of faithfulness to God.”

In Jesus’ letter to Smyrna there was no rebuke whatsoever for these faithful, suffering Christians. This is in striking contrast with Christ’s evaluations of five of the other six churches, which He rebuked. Smyrna’s sufferings, though extremely difficult, had helped keep them pure in faith and life.

Let's look at this short letter again and listen carefully to what Jesus has to say to the persecuted church at Smyrna:

II. REMEMBER, I AM ALIVE!

_Revelation 2:8_ “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

Jesus knew what was going on in the town of Smyrna. He was aware of the persecution they were suffering and He knew they lived in constant fear of discovery and death. So He begins His letter to them by reminding them of who He was.

“I am the First and the Last -- I am the one who died and came to life again.”

These words were spoken to reassure them in their faith. He was reminding them the persecutions they were going through were only for a moment, and even though some would face death, they did not need to be afraid, He had overcome death, hell and the grave. Death would not be the end of life but the entry into a new, eternal life with Him.

The words of Christ remind us of the message that God gave the church at Corinth through the Apostle Paul:

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1 Corinthians 15:54–58 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”
55 “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

It is as if Christ was telling the church at Smyrna to, “Stand firm! Let nothing move you, not even the threat of death. I have conquered death and I stand with you. Remember, I am Alive!”

III. EVEN IN POVERTY, YOU ARE RICH

Revelation 2:9 “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan

The persecutions faced by the church in Smyrna were affecting the livelihood of its members. This church had little wealth or resources; they were poor by earthly standards.

As the trade center of Asia, Smyrna had a workman's guild that monitored the activity of all the craftsman and tradesman in the city. Whenever someone stood up and opposed the status quo or opposed worshiping the emperor as a god, they could be boycotted and shut out of opportunities for work. (Politics of business and religion haven’t changed much)

Because these Christians were bold for their faith they were being forced out of the workplace and weren't able to make a living. So how could Christ say they were rich in the midst of their poverty?

Matthew 6:19–21 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Every time the church stood up for Christ against emperor worship, every time the church suffered trials and persecutions because of their faith, they were storing up treasure in heaven.

• Their treasure, wealth, and their focus were not of this world but on the world to come. Because they had been laying their treasure in heaven by faith Jesus declared them to be rich.

9b …and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

In this church there were people were claiming to be Jews but Jesus Himself identifies them as being of the synagogue of Satan. While we are not entirely sure what was going on in the church at Smyrna, we can guess what Jesus is referring to here based on what we see today in the persecuted church.

First, He could be referring to the ongoing persecution of Christians by the Jews. At this time, Christianity was evolving but was still considered to be a sect of Judaism. In fact, in the eyes of the Romans, Jews and Christians were lumped together as one and the same.

Based on the words of Christ, we have to assume the Jews in the synagogue were spreading lies about the Christians to the government officials and the people of the city, not unlike the lies that caused the Christians to be blamed for burning Rome under the Emperor Nero.
The lies and slander resulted in greater pressure against the Christians and caused the government to increase their hostility towards these believers.

Satan is the father of lies and these types of lies and slander are common in the persecution of the church today:

In Pakistan when a bookstore owned by a Christian started growing and prospering, another bookseller falsely accused the Christian of burning the Koran. This lie and accusation of blasphemy against Islam inflamed the local Muslims who formed a mob and burned down the Christian's store, chasing the man and his family from their home in fear for their lives while the local police stood by and did nothing.

In Jerusalem when a bakery owned by Messianic Jews began to prosper, they were boycotted, threatened and attacked for their faith in Christ. Eventually they were forced to close their business and were driven out of their neighborhood by Orthodox Jews.

In America it is happening too, only not with mobs and riots but in the courtroom, as business owners who stand for the Christian faith are being closed down, fined and even jailed for refusing to violate their conscience.

Secondly, Jesus could be referring to the false Christians who had infiltrated the church as spies. This is a common problem in nations where the church is openly persecuted. People who profess to be Christians join a church but in reality, are working for the government and gathering information to assist in the persecution of the church.

This could be what Jesus is talking about in this verse but, regardless, it was obvious that the church at Smyrna was undergoing intense persecution and affliction and that its members were struggling to survive.

IV. DO NOT FEAR, BE FAITHFUL

Revelation 2:10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Jesus tells this church, "I know what you are going through and I know there are more persecutions to come, but don’t be afraid, I am with you! Do not fear, if you are faithful, even unto death as I was, I will give you the crown of life"

This is where faith becomes real. We all want a word from God but what it Christ was telling this church to hold on, more persecution is on the way, but He would be with us through them all?

Persecution was one of Satan's first tactics in his war against the church. Why? This early Apostolic church was wreaking havoc on Satan's worldwide dominion. People were getting saved and turning to Christ in record numbers and Satan knew something had to be done. He thought that he could just stamp out Christianity through persecution, both from evil world rulers and from the established religion of the day. But, it didn't work -- the more the church was persecuted -- the more it grew.

Watchman Nee, one of the great Chinese pastors of the 20th century, ministered to a growing church in China during a period of persecution just like this one. The communist government would send spies to
his church to make sure that he wasn't preaching anything against the government, and in their eyes, preaching Christ as Lord and Ruler of everything was treason against the government.

One Sunday, Watchman Nee didn't say a word; he just grabbed a glass of water off the table and looked like he was trying to crush it with his hands. He started shaking it and shaking it and all the water spilled out finally, he threw it on the ground and it shattered. Then he took his heel and ground it against the glass, breaking it up into smaller and smaller parts, ended the service and sent everyone home.

The government spies didn't have a clue what had just happened but the true believers did. The government of China was trying to stamp out Christianity’s but every time they destroyed a church by crushing it with their heel it didn't go away, it spread into more and more pieces and it grew and grew and grew, just like the glass in Watchman Nee's sermon delivered without words.

This is exactly what happened with the persecuted church at Smyrna; the more Satan tried to persecute them and wipe them off the face of the earth, the stronger they became and the more the message spread.

One really interesting thing here is Jesus’ statement that the church would suffer 10 days of persecution. Obviously, the word “day” here is meant symbolically -- this is not 10 literal days but 10 periods of history. As the days in the book of Revelation are commonly called prophetic days, each answering to a year, the ten years of tribulation may denote ten years of persecution; and this was precisely the duration of the persecution under the Emperor Diocletian, during which all the Asiatic Churches were grievously afflicted.3

In fact, the early church went through 10 major periods of persecution under the Roman Empire from A.D. 54 – 304 just as Christ said, and, during each of those periods of persecution, the church actually grew larger and stronger, spreading throughout the known world.

V. TO HIM WHO OVERCOMES

Revelation 2:11 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.”

This is the promise of Jesus, He who overcomes, he who persists under persecution, he who holds strong to faith in God, never breaking and never failing to give God glory and honor will not be hurt by the second death.

Here's an important spiritual truth; how many times should a person be born? Twice, once through natural birth, the second time through supernatural birth; being born again.

Now, how many times should a person die? The answer here is once. Heb. 9:27 “…it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” We all will die a natural death, unless the Lord comes for us first, leaving your earthly body behind. But the unbelievers, the non-Christian and Christ rejecters will suffer a second death.

Revelation 20:6 Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

Revelation 20:11–15 Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. 14 Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. 15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

The second death is eternal separation from God. The second death is eternity in the fiery torments of Hell and all who reject Jesus Christ, as Savior and Lord will suffer it.

But, Jesus tells the believers at Smyrna, "Don't be afraid! The world may persecute you. They may take away all your worldly wealth and all your material possessions, they may say all kinds of evil about you and even take your very life, but if you remain faithful, if you stand fast and true to the word believing the promise I have given you, you will overcome and you will not suffer the second death."

Conclusion

What the church at Smyrna experienced is the reality being faced by millions of believers throughout the world today.

Right now, our brothers and sisters in Christ are facing afflictions and persecutions just as the Christians in Smyrna did 2000 years ago. They are losing their jobs and businesses, their homes and their possessions. They are being ridiculed and mocked, arrested, beaten and tortured, and many as we have graphically witnessed in Libya, are losing their lives.

Persecution takes many forms, but it is a fact that should propel the church in America to action.

First, we pray and then educate ourselves. There are many organizations that are dedicated to getting the word out about the persecuted church; Voice of the Martyrs, Open Door, Jihad Watch and Christian Freedom International.

Go to their sites, read their information and learn about the true extent of persecution you will never hear about in the media. And we can give our resources in support of the persecuted church. Foursquare Missions has many missionaries who are working in restricted nations.

Second, we pray and get involved. We can write and call our elected officials and ask our government get involved in human rights issues and to take a stand on behalf of religious persecution of any kind and support the leaders who do so.

And, third, the most important of all, we can pray. While we may never see the face of any of these men and women who are being persecuted for their faith, God does. He sees them and He hears their cries and He is moving on their behalf.
In Ephesians 6:18, Paul tells us we should be, “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.”

Through our prayers, we touch the throne of Heaven and put a hedge of spiritual protection around these faithful churches. We can pray that the eyes of their enemies might be blinded to their presence and the hearts of the leaders in their countries might be changed. We can pray that the faith of these men and women would be strong and not falter. Pray that they would stand firm and overcome all the trials and afflictions that might come their way.

If you do nothing else, pray, for I still believe that prayer changes everything.

We’re going to close in prayer right now and I ask you to join me and lift up the persecuted church in the Middle East and around the world. I want also to pray for America Christians to awaken from their sleep and indifference and pray as never before for revival in our own land and around the world.

God is calling us to make a difference in the lives of these people and we must begin today. Take your handout and let us pray.
Six Biblical ways you can pray for the Middle East

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 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: “And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that your bond-servants may speak your word with all confidence, while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of your holy servant 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 the Middle East.

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 and justice in the Middle East.

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

J. Lee Grady 2/18/2015   http://www.charismamag.com/blogs/fire-in-my-bones/22581-how-to-pray-when-terrorists-are-