FRONTLINE FAITH

Lessons Of Courageous Christianity From The Persecuted Church

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Hello,

In a world of increasing scepticism and religious divide, we can often get caught up in thinking Christianity is under attack, but is there something we’re missing?

The Challenge Of Opposition

As we see Christianity debated in public more frequently than ever, we can be tempted to think that our faith is less relevant to the world than it once was. As people are more tolerant of other religions and life choices, and seem to be less accepting of the gospel, we can be left asking, "Where’s God in all of this?"

But that’s the gospel story; a world that is turning away from Jesus when they desperately need to turn towards Him.

Maybe what we perceive as an attack is actually a God-given opportunity.

Think of the impact we can have if we shift our lens from believing that changes in culture are the undoing of Christianity, to believing that changes are the greatest opportunity to share Jesus.

Share Your Story

Last year, on a trip to Central Asia, a believer told me the story of Jesus healing a demon-possessed man in Mark 5. When Jesus was getting into a boat to leave the region, the man begged to go with him, but Jesus did not let him. Instead, Jesus told him to, “Go home to his own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you.”

My friend from Central Asia asked me, “Why did Jesus tell him to stay?”

He went on to say that if the formerly demon-possessed man had gone on that boat with Jesus, perhaps a few people might’ve heard of his miraculous change.

But in staying and living out his transformation, the man could personally attest to Jesus’ goodness and power to those who knew him best. And later, when Jesus fed the 4,000 in Mark 8, those people were from the demon-possessed man’s region. Having seen the miraculous transformation Jesus had in one man’s life, they wanted to hear more.

By staying and sharing his story, the demon-possessed man’s impact for Jesus was colossal.

Our stories have the most power to those who know us.
A Childlike Faith

In Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday, five-year-old Debbie learnt that following Jesus, can come with a high cost.

On Easter Sunday last year, Islamic extremists attacked three Sri Lankan churches during their Easter services, claiming hundreds of lives and severely injuring even more. Many of those most deeply affected were children.

The Consequence of Faith

Debbie was just five years old at the time of the attacks. Raised in a Christian home, she regularly attended the children’s program at Zion Church in eastern Sri Lanka with her family. Her mother was one of the teachers.

But on 21 April 2019, Debbie’s life changed forever. An extremist strapped with explosives came into the church courtyard where she and several other children had gathered before their church began and detonated his bomb.

28 people from the congregation, including Debbie’s parents and cousin, lost their lives in the explosion. Debbie suffered shrapnel injuries and burns, and was hospitalised along with her younger sister and many others.

Debbie’s injuries were so severe that she had to spend over a month in the Intensive Care Unit. Even after this time, she was left without her eyesight, and was still learning to walk again. Her grandmother often had to carry her from place to place.

Unwavering Hope

Despite the severity of her injuries, when Debbie returned home, she came with incredible joy and energy. She passed the time by reciting the alphabet, counting and spelling her name out loud. But most of all, Debbie loves to sing.

Her favourite song from church is a reminder of the abundant gifts and provision of God:

“Little, little children, look around and see, Jesus gave us this world. Listen to the birds, tweet, tweet, tweet; Listen to the waterfalls, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. The Garden of Eden is very beautiful.”

Debbie’s experience that Easter Sunday did not diminish her faith; in fact, it strengthened it. Her joy could not be shaken as she held onto God’s promises for the future.

“Little, little children, look around and see, Jesus gave us this world.”

Her favourite Bible story is that though Adam and Eve sinned, Jesus still came to save everyone," she said. “Jesus came to save us! And when Jesus came, He had victory over Satan, and Satan was defeated.

“I believe that one day, Jesus will come again, and I am so excited! He will open my eyes and I will see my family again.”

Joy That Can’t Be Touched

In Matthew 18, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Debbie’s story demonstrates what it looks like to have a pure, hopeful and childlike faith. It is a reminder that childlike faith in Jesus is characterised by joy, a joy that the world cannot touch.

Through God’s promises, we have certainty in a hope that does not waver and a joy that will not be shaken, as we look forward to a day when the entire body of Christ will come together in perfect unity.

Stand with the persecuted Church: onewiththem.org
The Cost of Celebrating Easter
Lessons We Can Learn From Those Who Suffer Attacks At Easter

Around the world, the persecuted church share our faith but not always our freedom. In many places, as Christians gather to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus at Easter, their worship increasingly marks them as a target for those who oppose Jesus. Yet as Easter reminds us, times of great sorrow are not the end for Christians. Amidst destruction and even death, a life with Christ brings new hope and new life. As believers wrestle with the aftermath of attacks at Easter, their courageous faith points us to Jesus.

“We celebrate Easter, knowing that at any time, a suicide bomber can come and disrupt our service, our worship, our praying. Then I think, ‘Will it really be disrupted? Or will I be sent into the fullness of worship?’”

— Pakistani Christian Mother of two.

Suffering On Earth Is Not The End
— Easter Sunday 2015 | Kenya

On Easter Sunday 2015, extremist group al-Shabaab attacked Garissa University College in Kenya, specifically targeting Christians. 143 students lost their lives.

Reachel was attending a morning prayer service when the extremists attacked. Although the attack left her with permanent injuries, Reachel came to see God even in her suffering, finding comfort in His promises.

She said, “Through faith, I’ve been able to move on and understand God is somehow in it. Even when I was lying on the ground that day and thought I might die, I knew that God would save my soul and that, if so, I would escape the suffering here on Earth.”

The Victory Belongs To God
— Easter Sunday 2016 | Pakistan

As families celebrated Easter in Lahore Park, extremists detonated a bomb. 75 lives were taken; 29 of them were children.

A Christian mother of two said, “We celebrate Easter knowing that at any time a suicide bomber can come and disrupt our service, our worship, our praying. Then I think, ‘Will it really be disrupted? Or will I be sent into the fullness of worship?’”

No matter the earthly outcome, we know that God has already won the battle, and that all glory, honour and praise belongs to Him. Though our lives on Earth may end, our worship never will.

God’s Grace Triumphs Over Anger
— Palm Sunday 2017 | Egypt

On Palm Sunday 2017, extremists attacked two churches in northern Egypt. Over 40 people lost their lives and more than 100 others were injured.

Samiha* was attending a morning service at St Peters Church when an extremist entered the building and detonated his bomb.

Left with severe facial injuries and numerous surgeries ahead of her, Samiha delved deeper into the Bible, seeking after God’s heart. What she found was surprising. There was no anger, no bitterness, no resentment. Instead, she uncovered grace.

Samiha said, “Now, if I would meet the family of the attacker, the only thing I would ask them is: Do you know Jesus?”

God Is Always In Control
— Easter Sunday 2019 | Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan bombings were one of the worst Easter Sunday attacks in history. Three churches and three hotels were targeted in the attacks which took place during Easter services and claimed 259 lives.

Chrishanthi was attending a service at Zion Church in the country’s east when the attack occurred. Her husband was killed as he confronted the extremist before the explosion.

Despite her pain, Chrishanthi trusted that God was working for her good in all things, knowing that He has a plan for all of us.

She said, “Nothing happens without God knowing. And what I know is that God is love.”

* Name changed for security purposes.
One With Them

Easter is a time of joy for the global Church. But for the persecuted church, it is also a time of great risk. Over Easter, persecution increases in both likelihood and severity, and many believers are faced with a choice: to live a life in comfort and safety, or to risk it all to follow Jesus.

In the past two years, over 2,000 people across Australia and New Zealand have joined the One With Them movement and stood with the persecuted church at Easter by giving one day’s wage and sharing their support on social media. As we see increased attacks in the Easter period, playing our role in supporting the body of Christ is more important than ever. That’s why we stand One With Them.

The First Fruit

On Easter Sunday 2019, extremist attacks on three churches across Sri Lanka left the Christian community devastated.

Kalviya was at her own church service when she received a phone call saying her brother and his family were missing in the attack.

“I heard the frantic voice of one of my siblings on the other line;” she remembered. “He was saying ‘Sister, there’s a bomb in Zion Church! Come! Many have died! Come right now’.”

Kalviya began to make her way to Zion Church. While travelling, she received another phone call. Her brother, sister-in-law and one-year-old nephew hadn’t survived the explosion.

“You know, it was my brother who used to tell me about Jesus,” Kalviya remembered. “My elder sister and I were devoted Hindus. We didn’t want Christ in our lives. But after my brother’s pastor gave me a Bible, visited me constantly and asked me to read the scriptures and know Jesus for myself, I began to follow Christ.

“I know that when you’re a Christian, there will be trials. When I read Scripture, I understood that we were created by God. I saw, from beginning to end, that there is a God.

“I know God has prepared us in advance. My brother is one of the first fruits of the family. I know that I’ll see him again.”

Stand With Them

Easter is a dangerous time for Christians like Kalviya, as they gather to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The persecuted church needs the support of the global Church after attacks like the Sri Lankan bombings: This is why we stand One With Them.

Local partners of Open Doors were able to provide aid and care to the families in Sri Lanka who were grieving in their time of loss.

One mother reflected, “You were there with us to hold, to comfort, to heal, and to help us with all your blessings and scripture. Moreover, you passionately took part in all our grief with love and care. Thus, we express our heartfelt gratitude to you.”

Jesus unites all who follow Him into one body with many members, calling each one to serve one another for His glory.

In standing One With Them, you are supporting the body of Christ. One Church. One Hope. One With Them.

Stand with the persecuted Church this Easter. Visit onewiththem.org

On 8 April 2020 we’re asking every Christian to work an ordinary day with extraordinary impact. Here’s how:

1. Donate one day’s wage to the persecuted church.
2. Draw a cross on your wrist to show your solidarity of standing One With Them.
3. Share a picture of your cross on social media with the hashtag #onewiththem.
“I am very glad that you are standing with us.”
– Nadia* (Egypt)

Nadia* was going to church with members of her family when extremists attacked their bus. They took the lives of any men who refused to convert to Islam, including her son.

“I have chosen to accept God’s will, even though I might not understand it,” Nadia said. “My vision is limited, but God’s vision is unlimited. Jesus says in John 13:7, ‘You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.’”

Open Doors was able to reach out to Nadia, offering her life-changing support and prayers from the global Church.

“It’s so good to hear those who died for their faith don’t only make us in Egypt proud, but also make other Christians proud by not renouncing their faith. I am very glad that you are standing with us and support us. You are our brothers and sisters in Christ and we love you so much.

“I want you to continue praying for my children, my husband and myself. Pray for all the families of those who died for their faith that day, and those who are dying for their faith all over the world each day.

“Pray that God takes care of His people and His church in Egypt and around the world.”

– Nadia* (Egypt)

“I’ve experienced what it is to be part of the body of Christ.”
– Jana* (Jordan)

21-year-old Jana found Jesus when a relative invited her to a Bible study group.

She began delving into the Word daily, taking part in worship and fellowship, and going to Christian summer camps.

Jana said, “During these activities, they ask us to dig deep inside and really think about what we hear in the Word of God.

“It is very important to have a Bible, to be close to the Bible. It is the way God speaks to me.”

Despite pressure from authorities and the wider community, God is moving in Jordan, building His kingdom and changing lives.

“Before, I used to think that I was able to practice my faith by myself,” Jana said. “But now that I’m part of this group, I’ve experienced what it is to be part of the body of Christ - to share your weaknesses and suffering with others. It has made a difference in my heart.”

This is the body of Christ at its best, each part suffering and rejoicing together. One Church. One hope. One family.

*Names changed for security purposes.

**Letter Writing Campaign**

Encourage Children in Central Asia

Children of Christian believers in Central Asia often face unique challenges because of their faith. Some are caught up in attacks experienced by the whole Christian community, others are discriminated against at school, and others lose parents or family members to violence or prison.

Special permission is needed to work with children in all Central Asian countries, and most of these countries legally prohibit teaching religion to young people under the age of 18.

This means that children cannot attend church or youth meetings. They are not allowed to own a Bible or any other Christian books.

Despite these restrictions, the church is growing in Central Asia! But believers, and especially children, are often left feeling isolated by restrictions on meeting together and sharing the gospel.

You can help children of the persecuted church in Central Asia know that they are part of the global body of Christ by sending them beautiful drawings.

Your drawings will help children of the persecuted church know that they are connected to and loved by their Christian family around the world, giving them the courage and strength to stand strong in their faith.

Please send your letters by 30 April 2020.

**Australia:** 11/10 Gladstone Road, Castle Hill NSW 2154
**New Zealand:** PO Box 51236 Tawa, Wellington 5249

**Do:**
– For security reasons, please send only drawings, not letters.
– On the drawing, provide your name and country only (optional).
– On the back of the envelope, please include your full name and address.

**Do not:**
– Mention Open Doors.
– Send money.
– Criticise a country.

**Sixty Second Stories**

Short Stories About The Value Of Standing One With Them

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**Bear In A Bag**

**This Mother’s Day, buy a special gift for a woman in your life to celebrate her... and bless a child of the persecuted church.**

**A Bear In A Bag comes with everything you need to create your first Knot Forgotten toy.**

**Order yours today for $35 + postage**

“My father kept asking me, ‘Frederick, why can’t you change universities? At least go to a place where we’ll be satisfied with your security.’

But I was assured of one thing: only God can grant my security in Garissa. I knew I had two missions to accomplish in the northeast: to come home with a degree in education and to spread the gospel.”

When Frederick told his family that he had been accepted into university, they urged him not to go. He had been accepted into Garissa University in Northeastern Kenya, a region well known as a regular target of attacks by extremist group al Shabaab.

At university, Frederick became the chairman of the Fellowship of Christian University Students. Each day the group would gather, beginning with a 5am prayer meeting, and then classes. Afterwards, they took part in community services such as cleaning and gardening and then attended an evening worship service.

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Frederick stayed up until 2 in the morning counselling a member of the group. The following morning, he was so tired he missed the morning prayer session. But the sound of gunfire nearby shook him awake.

Extremists had stormed the university, and the prayer session was their first target. All 22 people in the meeting lost their lives.

Frederick left his room to investigate the sounds but turned back to get a shirt and shoes. But the extremists had already entered the dormitory.

With no way out, he hid under his bed.

“They shot someone in my room. I cannot explain what happened to me, I couldn’t tell if I was dead, I couldn’t tell if I was asleep, but I lay still for hours.

“The process of being rescued was very, very dangerous. The soldiers were still trying to locate the extremists, so it was a matter of life and death. But thank God in the midst of those challenges I was rescued safely.”

A Deadly Prayer Meeting

The evening before Easter Sunday, the atmosphere at the worship night was different.

“Spiritually, you could tell something was going on,” Frederick said. “Almost everybody went down on their knees in worship without caring if it was dusty or not. The meeting also went longer than usual.”

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A United Hope

148 people lost their lives in the attack on Garissa University, and over 100 others were injured.

“I felt just like Job receiving the bad news. It was really painful to know we have lost such a big number from our small community, including the lady that I had counselled the night before. Unlike me, she made it to the prayer meeting.

“But Christ says be glad, be exceedingly glad, when you go through persecution because by so doing you are going through the path that Jesus Himself went through.”

All over the world, persecution against Christians is rising, both in frequency and intensity. Though it may differ in nature, there is a common thread – persecution exists where the gospel is shared.

Now more than ever, the global body of Christ must stand united, helping one another follow Jesus all over the world, no matter the cost.

Frederick said, “Some are saying that I am very strong. But I tell you if not for your prayers I could not have come this far. I would have collapsed on the very day but for the grace of God, which is sufficient and the support of other believers.

“Christ speaks about persecution for the Church, not just in Kenya. It’s the Church under the sun. We are one body, although we are separated by geography. We need to support one another. We need to see the body of Christ grow together.”

“But Christ says be glad, be exceedingly glad, when you go through persecution because by so doing you are going through the path that Jesus Himself went through.”
The Power Of Perseverance

In Africa, many believers must hide their faith. They attend secret church services and watch closely for any possible extremist attacks. However, the persecution of African believers isn’t limited to intolerant and disapproving strangers. Often, the most violent and oppressive acts of persecution come from those they love the most.

Faithful Resolve

Adamu* was born in Nigeria. Raised in an Islamic community of Fulani herdsmen, he grew up despising Christians as the group regularly targeted churches and believers.

But after hearing the testimony of his Christian colleague, Adamu gave his life to Christ. He left his family home and began to meet with other Christians in secret.

When Adamu’s family discovered his faith, they disowned him and began to plan how they could get rid of him.

“One day my brother asked me to go with him and some friends to another farm,” Adamu said. “Along the way, he pretended to be called away, giving the others an opportunity to kidnap me.

“They blindfolded me, tied my hands and put me in the trunk of the car. Somewhere deep in the bush, they took me out and opened my eyes.”

Adamu was held in the wilderness for two weeks without proper food or shelter. His captors promised him freedom and safety, but only if he returned to Islam and abandoned his faith.

“On Easter Sunday they asked me one last time if I would renounce Christ. But I told them I would never do that,” he said.

Adamu’s captors violently attacked him. He was badly hurt, and his wounds quickly became infected. Assuming he would soon die of his injuries, his captors drove him back into town and abandoned him. But, with the help of fellow believers, he was able to reach a nearby hospital and receive life-saving care.

A Privilege To Suffer

Rejected and attacked by his own family and left with mental and physical scars, Adamu learnt the challenging and empowering lesson of what it means to persevere for Christ.

“While others were celebrating Easter, I was in the forest with my abductors. My family tried to have me killed, but God spared my life. Through all this, I was comforted by the passage in Matthew 10 that says, ‘Because of my name you will be hated and persecuted, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.’ I count it a privilege to have suffered because of my faith.

“Now I have forgiven my persecutors, but I pray that those who hurt me will turn to Christ and find peace.”

In the trials and challenges Adamu encountered along his walk with Jesus, he never lost sight of his purpose - to glorify God where he was, no matter the season and no matter the cost. Risking his safety, physical freedom, and even his life to follow Christ, he embraced persecution, knowing that like him, Jesus was no stranger to suffering.

*Name changed for security purposes.

Book A Speaker

Inspire and challenge your walk with Jesus. Hear lessons of courageous faith from our passionate and experienced speakers at your church service or event.

opendoors.org.au/book-a-speaker
opendoors.org.nz/book-a-speaker
A Dedicated Faith

Experience A Day In The Life Of A Christian In The Muslim World.

Choose one day during the month of Ramadan to experience the dedicated faith of a Christian living in a Muslim country. Come together to support Christians as they seek to make Jesus known all throughout the Muslim world.