

## Religious Freedom & Persecution

### Intro – Roots of American Religious Freedom

- We know that many of our forefathers came to America **seeking religious freedom**. In Europe, they had been subject to state religion and wanted the freedom to worship as they saw fit.
- Those who came to the New World quickly decided it would be best to **declare their independence** from Great Britain, and on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1776 that's just what they did.
- The Revolutionary War had already been **raging for a year prior to** the Declaration of Independence, but the war intensified afterwards. Thankfully, the war ended in September 1783.
- By 1786, defects in the post-Revolutionary War **Articles of Confederation** were apparent, such as the lack of central authority over foreign and domestic commerce.
- Congress endorsed a plan to draft a new constitution, and on May 25, 1787, **the Constitutional Convention convened** at Independence Hall in Philadelphia.
- On September 17, 1787, after three months of debate moderated by convention president George Washington, the new U.S. constitution, which created a strong federal government with an intricate system of checks and balances, was signed by 38 of the 41 delegates present at the conclusion of the convention. As dictated by Article VII, the document would not become binding until it was ratified by nine of the 13 states. That happened on **June 21<sup>st</sup> 1788**.

- On September 25, 1789, the first Congress of the United States adopted 12 amendments to the U.S. Constitution—the Bill of Rights—and sent them to the states for ratification. **Ten of those amendments were ratified in 1791.**
  - The first Amendment reads – “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”
  - Since its inception, America has ALWAYS seen the freedom of religion as **a fundamental human right**. Many men & women have fought and died to preserve that freedom for us and many others.
  - While Americans have enjoyed religious freedom, many others across the globe have not. Many have been **persecuted for their faith**, and sadly many others have been **killed**. Let's assess the status of religious freedom at home & abroad.
1. What is religious freedom?
    - Freedom of religion is a principle that supports the freedom of an individual or community, in public or private, to manifest religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance. It also includes the freedom to change one's religion or beliefs.
    - **Worldwide** a minority of countries have high restrictions on religion, but unfortunately those countries contain most of the world's population. 48% of countries of low restrictions, 20% have moderate restrictions, and 32% are high.

- Those living in countries that experience high religious restrictions make up about **70% of the world's population**. That means 7 out of every 10 people in the world have very little access to religious freedom.

## 2. What is religious persecution?

- Religious persecution is the systematic mistreatment of an individual or group of individuals as a response to their religious beliefs or affiliations or lack thereof.
- Persecution is a worldwide problem, but the problem is worse in some countries than others.
- The Top 10 Worst Countries for Freedom
  - North Korea – Atheist/Communist
  - Afghanistan – Islam
  - Somalia – Islam
  - Libya – Islam
  - Pakistan – Islam
  - Sudan – Islam
  - Eritrea – Dictatorial Paranoia
  - Yemen – Islam
  - Iran – Islam
  - India – Hinduism
- In these countries, Christians and those of other faiths are routinely harassed, arrested, detained, tortured, denied due process, and often killed.
- Some Examples from India
  - On **June 19, 2018**, five Christian women (aged 20 to 35) were performing a street play in Jharkhand when they were abducted and then gang raped in a forest.

- On **January 20, 2018**, the body of Pastor Gideon Periyaswamy in Adaiyalachery (Kanchipuram District, Tamil Nadu) was found hung from the thatched roof of his house, a week after he complained to police about opposition from radical Hindus.
- On **December 14, 2017**, a carol-singing group belonging to St. Ephrem's Theological College in Satna, Madhya Pradesh, was detained by police following a complaint from radical Hindu activists who accused the group of being involved in religious conversion—a charge often leveled against Christians to target them.

- In total, **over 200 million Christians** face intense persecution worldwide every day. 11 Christians are martyred for their faith **daily** in the Top 50 persecution countries on the WorldWatch List.
- Many others who aren't caught, detained, tortured, or murdered have to live in constant fear and hiding – especially when they worship.

## 3. Is there religious persecution in America?

- As Americans, we often tend to think that religious persecution happens in other countries – far away from where we live. That's not the case. Though we have the freedom to assemble, worship, and practice our religion, **some of our freedoms have come under attack**.
- Many of us tend to believe that the persecution began in the 60s, with the removal of prayer and Bible reading from the schools. Since then, the assault on religion (Christianity) has intensified.

- Other examples of persecution in America:
  - Courthouses and other public places have been forced to remove **Ten Commandments displays**, some of which have been in place for years. The ACLU has led the charge.
  - Local school districts and the courts have banned **student-led prayer** and school events, including graduation, games, etc.
  - Several retailers have removed “**Merry Christmas**” from their advertisements, and have instructed their employees not to say “Merry Christmas,” but rather “Happy Holidays”.
  - Schools have banned Christmas in favor of more neutral expressions – “Winter Break,” “Holiday Concert,” etc. Nativity scenes and Christian carols are often excluded.
  - ACLU and others have labored to have “**under God**” (1945) removed from the pledge of allegiance and “**In God We Trust**” (1956) removed from our money.
  - Crosses have been ordered to be removed in cemeteries and other public places across the country.
  - “Freedom From Religion” and other groups like them have fought to remove the church’s **tax-exempt status** and the ministerial **housing allowance**.
- While the persecution Christians face is not as severe as brothers and sisters in other countries, it is still persecution and it is certain that the persecution will only intensify.

4. Are there biblical examples of religious persecution?
- The examples of persecution in Scripture are many, but here are some of the most noteworthy:
    - Shadrack, Meshach, and Abed-Nego – refused to worship the king’s image and were thrown in the furnace – delivered by one like unto the Son of God (Dan. 3)
    - Daniel – broke the law by praying to God three times a day, arrested and thrown in the lion’s den, delivered by God (Dan. 6)
    - John the Baptist – imprisoned by Herod and finally beheaded because he preached against the king’s immoral marriage to his brother’s wife (Matt. 14)
    - Jesus – persecuted by the religious leaders who refused to receive Him as the Messiah, condemned by the Romans
    - Apostles – tradition says that each of the apostles died a martyr’s death because they refused to recant their Christian faith following the resurrection
    - Saul – persecuted the Christians because they had gone after that rebel-rouser Jesus (Acts 7) – stood by at Stephen’s death
    - Paul – persecuted many times for his defense of Jesus & the faith (2 Cor. 11:24ff)
  - When persecuted, the response of these men was always the same – trusting God and accepting the consequences of their faith!
  - Many modern examples join these heroes of the faith – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jim Elliot, Bill Wallace, etc. Tertullian – “**The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.**”

5. How will we respond to religious persecution?

- We should expect persecution as followers of Jesus. He told us time and again that we would be hated for His sake – *“because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”* (John 15:19).
- When we are persecuted by other **individuals or our culture**, we should seek to turn the other cheek and demonstrate the love of Christ (Matt. 5:38ff). Realize no enemy can harm your soul.
- When our faith is challenged, we should **be prepared to defend** our faith (1 Pet. 3:15). Not everyone will be interested in what we’ve got to say, but we must not cease to share the truth.
- As Christians, we need to **make every effort possible to comply** with the law of the land, realizing that the governing authorities have been appointed by God (Rom. 13:1, 1 Pet. 2:17).
- When the governing authorities **require us to do some ungodly**, we have to say NO! Like the apostles who were commanded not to witness for Christ, we must say, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).
- We need to prepare now for losing our jobs, homes, possessions, etc. We must prepare for being taken from our families. We must prepare for imprisonment, torture, abuse. And God forbid – we must prepare for even death.

Conclusion – Polycarp (2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian)

- As they gave him one more chance to recant, Polycarp said, “Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong, how then

can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked.”

- Polycarp was then burned at the stake and was pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor.
- Two Questions
  - Are you ready to live for Jesus?
  - Are you ready to die for Jesus?

*“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”*

Romans 8:18

*“I’d rather stand with God and be judged by the world than to stand with the world and be judged by God.”*