

Focusing on the Persecuted Church: The Century of Martyrs

International statistics show that an estimated 150,000 Christians are martyred every year. More than 200 million Christians are restricted from living out their Christianity. There is a growing onslaught on Christianity world-wide. More and more countries are accepting legislation that creates greater difficulty for Christians to live out their faith and restricts them from gathering freely. This is true of China, Russia, a number of 2 countries in the Middle East, even Europe and Canada. There are also continuous efforts to ban the Bible.

As we focus in prayer on the Persecuted Church, it is important to have insight into the history of those who lost their lives for serving and following Jesus Christ.

The following is a shortened history of the persecution of Christians over the centuries:

The persecutions of the 20th century were the most severe in the history of the church. In 1905, it started in the **Baltic States**. Time and again Bolshevik gangs ill-treated and killed many Christians. From 1894 to 1916 the **Armenians**, who had been officially Christian since 301, were repeatedly persecuted. In 1916, 1 million Armenians were killed by the "Young Turks." Today any mention of this massacre is outlawed in Turkey. The Aramaic-speaking **Assyrian** Christians, too, were greatly afflicted, first in 1895, then in 1933 and again in the 1970's and 80's when they were cruelly decimated. In South Eastern Turkey, the **Syrian** Orthodox Church has been reduced to a few thousand members. In 1921-22, when **Smyrna** was ceded to Greece, two million Greeks were exiled and thousands murdered. On 9 September 1922, 120,000 Greeks died in Smyrna alone. This brought to an end a 4,000-year-old period of Greek Christian history.

However, the fiercest persecutions took place in **Russia**. They started with the victory of the doctrines of Karl Marx, a German Jew who initially embraced Christianity, but later turned to Satanism. He wanted to "avenge himself on the One who rules above". His disciple Lenin, at the age of 16 tore his cross from his neck and spat and trampled on it. When communism was established in Russia, the Soviets immediately started to persecute the Christians. In 1918 bishops, priests and nuns were tried, shot and deported. In 1922 alone 2,690 priests, 1,962 monks and 3,447 nuns, altogether 8,100 people, were killed for righteousness' sake. The next wave of persecution came in 1928, when about 5,000 Christians perished during the dispossession of the Kulaks (farmers).

However, the worst came in 1927 after a census identified those who still called themselves Christians. In the next 6 years, 12 million people are estimated to have lost their lives. It is assumed that in 70 years of atheism and communism, 20 million men, women and children were killed for the sake of Christ. Now, nearly 20 years after the collapse of the USSR, it is an absolute miracle of God's grace that the Russian church is rising to new life again.

Even outside Europe Christians suffered great persecution. After 1920 and again in 1945, **Korea** endured affliction from both the Shinto religion and from communism. Yet Korea, too, has had a glorious revival and now sends missionaries into the entire world. In **Mexico**, a communist-infected liberalism caused the death of 5,000 priests. In **Spain**, during the civil war, the "Reds" killed 6,700 priests and monks. **Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria** recorded untold suffering of the saints. However, God raised up a defender of the suffering. Pastor Richard Wurmbrand of Romania was a Messianic Jew who, after many years of incarceration and torture, was redeemed for 10, 000 US\$ by Norwegian Christians. On his arrival in the West he established the *Voice of the Martyrs*, an organisation which has brought help and solace to martyred Christians all over the world.

China, Laos and Cuba, too, have not escaped persecution by the Communists. **Indonesia, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen** have fallen victim to Islamic persecutions. **Africa** has also had many martyrs, especially **Nigeria**, the **Sudan** and other countries. St. Paul describes the lot of the martyrs as follows: *Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and*

flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated – the world was not worthy of them... (Heb.11:35f). But such intense persecution brings a believer closer to Christ and Jesus comforts all who endure on His account. If we endure, we will also reign with him, is the promise (2Tim.2:12). The martyrs have a special place in God's kingdom, for they are those who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them... for the Lamb will be their shepherd... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Re.7:14b-17).