

**THE
CHRISTIAN
AND
PERSECUTION**

Learning from Those
who've Endured

MODULE 10



Lesson 10

Learning from Those who've Endured

Learning Objective:

This lesson will enable the student to reflect on the material covered in other modules by considering the testimonies of believers who have endured hardship and persecution. By the end of the lesson the student will understand the spiritual strengths that enabled others to stand firm. They will be encouraged to reflect on these strengths – not in a way that makes them feel inadequate but as an inspiration to find practical ways to develop these strengths for themselves and those they serve. Encouraged by these examples, they will be equipped as they prepare for persecution or walk through persecution.

Preparatory Bible Reading: Hebrews 11:1-12:3

Lesson Outline:

1. Introduction
2. Dmitri's story
3. Strength to endure: personal characteristics
 - a. Knowing Jesus
 - b. Praying and fasting
 - c. Worshipping from the heart
 - d. Accepting persecution as normal
 - e. Enjoying freedom in Christ
 - f. Overcoming fear
4. Strength to endure: characteristics of a supporting community
 - g. Memorising Scripture
 - h. Belonging to the family
 - i. Trusting others for loved ones
 - j. Knowing the suffering is for Jesus' sake
 - k. Remembering those who've gone before
5. Conclusion

Additional Reading

Lesson Ten Evaluation

Bibliography

Module 10: Learning from Those who've Endured

Many Christians have suffered and endured persecution before us. Their stories can be an encouragement and an inspiration for those who suffer today.

1. Introduction

Dr. Nik Ripken is a senior Christian worker who has served the church in many parts of the world. For many years he was involved in Christian ministry in Somalia – ministry that was slow, frustrating and heartbreaking. He led small numbers to faith in Christ but saw them be killed. He never was able to establish even a small church in Somalia.

Perhaps you are not surprised. You may be thinking: "I could have told him that it's useless to go to Somalia to build a church. It's one of the toughest places on earth to preach the gospel. There is no central government. The country has long been afflicted with armed conflict and humanitarian disaster. There are strict Islamic groups who are ruthless with those they do not approve of or agree with."

Ripken would understand that reaction. He himself called his work in Somalia 'insane.' In fact, he wrote a book about it: *The Insanity of Obedience*. Most of the people coming to Christ in his ministry were killed. He lost a son while serving in this ministry. In the end he had to flee for his life. He did not come out without scars on his soul and some burning questions. How do you prepare people for persecution? What makes a believer strong enough to endure? Is there a method to safeguard believers?

These questions led him to initiate worldwide research. He visited persecuted Christians all over the world and interviewed them about how they were able to persevere under great pressure. How did they manage to go through persecution and come through victorious? By 'victorious,' we do not mean 'unshaken.' Nor do we mean without hurt. To be victorious is to stay close to Jesus, in obedience to him. Ripken interviewed many believers who had come to Christ from backgrounds that were Communist, Islamic and Hindu. On many occasions he wondered why those people did not write books about the experiences they had endured, so others could benefit from their stories. He realised the answer – there is already a book about persecuted believers: the Bible.

Towards the end of his book *The Insanity of Obedience* he summarises eleven signs that he noticed were good indicators that believers were likely to endure under persecution. In this lesson we will consider each of those eleven signs of strength.

These signs provide a helpful measure for us. They should serve as an encouragement and a motivation. Don't be discouraged if you fall short on some of these characteristics. If you think you fall short, be honest with God and ask for his help. Romans 8:31 reminds us that God is on our side. He will equip you with what you need to stand firm.

2. Dmitri's story

God honors the witness of his faithful servant, protecting his faith in Christ amidst sustained unspeakable persecution

At the start of his research Dr. Ripken had a meeting with a Russian veteran of faith, Dmitri. This is what he writes about his meeting:

Viktor and his friend picked me up. We began a four-hour drive through the countryside north of Moscow. On the way to our destination, Viktor told me what he knew about Dmitri, this fellow believer who had suffered much for the faith. For the rest of the trip, I listened to Viktor and his friend recount their faith journeys and life stories. We finally arrived at a small Russian village. We stopped in front of a tiny dwelling. Dmitri opened the door and he graciously welcomed us into his tiny home. "I want you to sit here," he instructed me. "This was where I was sitting when the authorities came to arrest me and send me to prison for seventeen years."

I settled in and listened with rapt attention over the next few hours as Dmitri related his unforgettable personal story. Dmitri told me that he had been born and raised in a believing family; his parents had taken him to church as a child. Over the decades, he explained, communism slowly destroyed most of the churches and places of worship. Many pastors were imprisoned or killed. By the time he was grown, Dmitri told me, the nearest remaining church building was a three-day walk away. It was impossible for his family to attend church more than once or twice a year. "One day," Dmitri told me, "I went to my wife and I said: 'You'll probably think that I am insane. I know that I have no religious training whatsoever, but I am concerned that our sons are growing up without learning about Jesus. This may sound like a crazy idea, but what would you think if just one night a week we gathered the boys together so I could read them a Bible story and try to give them a little of the training that they are missing because we no longer have a real church?'"

What Dmitri didn't know was that his wife had been praying for years that her husband would do something like that. She readily embraced his idea. He started teaching his family one night a week, reading from the old family Bible, then struggling to find the right words to explain what he had just read so that his children could understand. As he re-learned and re-told the Bible stories, his sons soon began helping with the task. Eventually, the boys and Dmitri and his wife were telling the familiar stories back and forth to each other. The more they learned, the more the children seemed to enjoy their family worship time. Eventually the boys started asking for more: "Papa, can we sing those songs that they sing when we go to the real church?" So Dmitri and his wife taught them the traditional songs of their faith. It seemed a natural progression for the family not only to read the Bible and sing, but also to take time together to pray. And they began to change a Bible study into real family worship.

Nothing could be hidden for long in small villages. Houses were close together and windows were often open. Neighbors began noticing what was going on with Dmitri's family. Some of them asked if they could come and listen to the Bible stories and sing the familiar songs. Dmitri protested that he was not trained to do this; he explained that he was not a minister. His excuse, however, didn't seem to dissuade his neighbors, and a small group began gathering to share in the reading and telling and discussing of Bible stories and to sing and pray together. By the time the little group grew to twenty-five people, the authorities had started to take notice. Local party officials came to see Dmitri. They threatened him physically, which was to be expected. What upset Dmitri much more was their accusation: "You have started an illegal church!" "How can you

say that?" he argued. "I have no religious training. I am not a pastor. This is not a church building. We are just a group of family and friends getting together. All we are doing is reading and talking about the Bible, singing, praying, and sometimes sharing what money we have to help out a poor neighbor. How can you call that a church?"

(I almost laughed at the irony of his claim. But this was early in my pilgrimage. I could not easily appreciate the truth that he was sharing. Looking back now, I understand that one of the most accurate ways to detect and measure the activity of God is to note the amount of opposition that is present. The stronger the persecution, the more significant the spiritual vitality of the believers. Surprisingly, all too often, persecutors sense the activity of God before the believing participants even realize the significance of what is happening! In the case of Dmitri, the officials could sense the threat of what he was doing long before it even crossed his mind.)

The communist official told Dmitri: "We don't care what you call it, but this looks like church to us. And if you don't stop it, bad things are going to happen." When the group grew to fifty people, the authorities made good on their threats. "I got fired from my factory job," Dmitri recounted. "My wife lost her teaching position. My boys were expelled from school. And," he added, "little things like that." When the number of people grew to seventy-five, there was no place for everyone to sit. Villagers stood shoulder-to-shoulder, cheek to-cheek inside the house. They pressed close in around the windows on the outside so they could listen as this man of God led the people of God in worship.

Then one night as Dmitri spoke (sitting in the chair where I was now seated), the door to his house suddenly, violently burst open. An officer and soldiers pushed through the crowd. The officer grabbed Dmitri by the shirt, slapped him rhythmically back and forth across the face, slammed him against the wall, and said in a cold voice: "We have warned you and warned you and warned you. We will not warn you again! If you do not stop this nonsense, this is the least that is going to happen to you." As the officer pushed his way back toward the door, a small grandmother took her life in her hands, stepped out of the anonymity of that worshipping community, and waved a finger in the officer's face. Sounding like an Old Testament prophet, she declared, "You have laid hands on a man of God and you will not survive!" That happened on a Tuesday evening, and on Thursday night the officer dropped dead of a heart attack.

The fear of God swept through the community and at the next house church service, more than 150 people showed up. The authorities couldn't let this continue, so Dmitri went to jail for seventeen years. I knew, because Dmitri was sitting right in front of me in his own home, that this particular persecution story was ultimately a story of survival and victory. This story would obviously have a happy ending. But that didn't mean that the story was going to be "nice" or easy to hear.

Indeed, it was a painful story. Dmitri spoke quietly of long, heart wrenching separation. He spoke of sweat, blood, and tears. He talked about sons growing up without their father in the house. He described a poor, struggling family enduring great hardship. This was not the kind of inspirational testimony that we love to celebrate; this was raw, biblical faith. This was the story of one man who refused to let go of Jesus—one man who refused to stop telling the good news to his family and neighbors. The authorities moved Dmitri a thousand kilometers away from his family and locked him in a prison.

His cell was so tiny that when he got out of bed, it took but a single step either to get to the door of his cell, to reach the stained and cracked sink mounted on the opposite wall, or to use the foul, open toilet in the “far” corner of the cell.

Even worse, according to Dmitri, he was the only believer among fifteen hundred hardened criminals. He said that his isolation from the Body of Christ was more difficult than even the physical torture. And there was much of that. Still, his tormentors were unable to break him. Dmitri pointed to two reasons for his strength in the face of torture. There were two spiritual habits that he had learned from his father, disciplines that Dmitri had taken with him into prison. Without these two disciplines, Dmitri insisted, his faith would have not survived. For seventeen years in prison, every morning at daybreak, Dmitri would stand at attention by his bed. As was his custom, he would face the east, raise his arms in praise to God, and then he would sing a heart song to Jesus.

The reaction of the other prisoners was predictable. Dmitri recounted the laughter, the cursing, the jeering. The other prisoners banged metals cups against the iron bars in angry protest; they threw food and sometimes human waste to try to shut him up and extinguish the only true light shining in that dark place every morning at dawn. There was another discipline that Dmitri told me about. Whenever he found a scrap of paper in the prison, he would sneak it back to his cell. There he would pull out a stub of a pencil or a tiny piece of charcoal that he had saved, and he would write on that scrap of paper, as tiny as he could, all the Bible verses and scriptural stories or songs that he could remember. When the scrap was completely filled, he would walk to the corner of his little jail cell where there was a concrete pillar that constantly dripped water—except in the wintertime when the moisture became a solid coat of ice on the inside surface of his cell. Dmitri would take the paper fragment, reach as high as he possibly could, and stick it on that damp pillar as a praise offering to God. Of course, whenever one of his jailors spotted a piece of paper on the pillar, he would come into his cell, take it down, read it, beat Dmitri severely, and threaten him with death. Still, Dmitri refused to stop his two disciplines. Every day he rose at dawn to sing his song. And every time he found a scrap of paper, he filled it with Scripture and praise.

This went on year after year after year. His guards tried to make him stop. The authorities did unspeakable things to his family. At one point, they even led him to believe that his wife had been murdered and that his children had been taken by the state. They taunted him cruelly, “We have ruined your home. Your family is gone.” Dmitri’s resolve finally broke. He told God that he could not take any more. He admitted to his guards, “You win! I will sign any confession that you want me to sign. I must get out of here to find out where my children are.” They told Dmitri, “We will prepare your confession tonight, and then you will sign it tomorrow. Then you will be free to go.” After all those years, the only thing that he had to do was sign his name on a document saying that he was not a believer in Jesus and that he was a paid agent of Western governments trying to destroy the USSR. Once he put his signature on that dotted line, he would be free to go. Dmitri repeated his intention: “Bring it tomorrow and I will sign it!”

That very night he sat on his jail cell bed. He was in deep despair, grieving the fact that he had given up. At that same moment, a thousand kilometers away, his family—Dmitri’s wife, his children who were growing up without him, and his brother—sensed through the Holy Spirit the despair of this man in prison. His loved ones gathered

around the very place where I was sitting as Dmitri told me his story. They knelt in a circle and began to pray out loud for him. Miraculously, the Holy Spirit of the living God allowed Dmitri to hear the voices of his loved ones as they prayed.

The next morning, when the guards marched into his cell with the documents, Dmitri's back was straight. His shoulders were squared and there was strength on his face and in his eyes. He looked at his captors and declared, "I am not signing anything!" The guards were incredulous. They had thought that he was beaten and destroyed. "What happened?" they demanded to know. Dmitri smiled and told them, "In the night, God let me hear the voices of my wife and my children and my brother praying for me. You lied to me! I now know that my wife is alive and physically well. I know that my sons are with her. I also know that they are all still in Christ. So I am not signing anything!"

His persecutors continued to discourage and silence him. Dmitri remained faithful. He was overwhelmed one day by a special gift from God's hand. In the prison yard, he found a whole sheet of paper. "And God," Dmitri said, "had laid a pencil beside it!" Dmitri went on, "I rushed back to my jail cell and I wrote every Scripture reference, every Bible verse, every story, and every song I could recall." "I knew that it was probably foolish," Dmitri told me, "but I couldn't help myself. I filled both sides of the paper with as much of the Bible as I could. I reached up and stuck the entire sheet of paper on that wet concrete pillar. Then I stood and looked at it: to me it seemed like the greatest offering I could give Jesus from my prison cell.

Of course, my jailor saw it. I was beaten and punished. I was threatened with execution." Dmitri was dragged from his cell. As he was dragged down the corridor in the center of the prison, the strangest thing happened. Before they reached the door leading to the courtyard—before stepping out into the place of execution—fifteen hundred hardened criminals stood at attention by their beds. They faced the east, and in what Dmitri told me sounded to him like the greatest choir in all of human history, those men raised their arms, and began to sing the heart song that they had heard Dmitri sing to Jesus every morning for all of those years. Dmitri's jailers instantly released their hold on his arms and stepped away from him in terror. One of them demanded to know, "Who are you?" Dmitri straightened his back and stood as tall and as proud as he could. He responded: "I am a son of the Living God, and Jesus is His name!" The guards returned him to his cell. Sometime later, Dmitri was released and he returned to his family.

Now years later, I listened as Dmitri told his story of his own unspeakable suffering and God's steady faithfulness. I found myself thinking of a time in Somalia when I envisioned creating some discipleship materials that might help believers in places of persecution, believers like Dmitri. What a ridiculous idea this seemed now. What could I possibly ever teach this man about following Jesus? Absolutely nothing! I was overwhelmed by what I had just heard. I held my head in my hands. I cried out in my heart: Oh God, What do I do with a story like this? I have always known of Your power, but I have never seen Your power on display like this! If this man represents a biblical faith, who am I? How small is my faith.

Dmitri's story was more dangerous to me than all the bullets in Somalia. Somalia endangered my life. The quality of Dmitri's faith endangered my soul. How can I, with my small faith, watch and listen as Daniel, Elijah, Moses, and Simon Peter burst forth

from the pages of the Bible? It was as if the Bible became present active tense for me for the first time. Its pages were flung wide and there was no escaping a God who is doing what He has always done.

Lost in my own thoughts, I realized that Dmitri was still speaking. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I apologized, “I wasn’t listening!” Dmitri dismissed my concern with a small shake of his head and a wry smile. “That’s okay,” he told me. “I wasn’t talking to you.” He went on to explain, “When you arrived this morning, God and I were discussing something; your visit interrupted that. So right now, when I saw that you were busy with your own thoughts, the Lord and I went back to finishing that conversation.” In that moment, I knew what I had to ask next. “Brother Dmitri, would you do something for me?” I asked. I hesitated to continue, but his eyes moved me forward: “Would you sing that song for me?” Dmitri pushed himself up from the table. He stared into my eyes for three or four seconds. Those seconds felt like an eternity to me. He turned slowly toward the east and stiffened his back to stand at attention. He lifted his arms and began to sing.

I don’t know Russian, so I didn’t understand a single word of his song. But I didn’t need to. The words probably didn’t matter. As Dmitri raised his arms and his voice in praise and sang that song that he had sung every morning in prison for seventeen years, the tears began to flow down both of our faces. Only then did I begin to grasp the meaning of worship and the importance of heart songs. I had tentatively arrived in Russia looking for answers and wondering if faith could survive and even grow in the world’s most hostile environments. Dmitri became one of my first guides on my journey. I began to sense that this journey was not about developing discipleship materials, but it was about walking with Jesus in hard places. I felt drawn to this life Dmitri had lived: knowing Jesus, loving Jesus, following Jesus, living with Jesus.

Our question, now, is this: Is it possible to live a victorious life in the midst of persecution? Dmitri’s story tells us plainly that victorious living is possible. If so, then how can such a life be lived? How can a believer have a victorious faith in a setting of suffering and persecution? In truth, the remainder of our interviews sought to answer this specific question. And through those interviews, we identified a number of common essential spiritual truths and practices present in the lives of believers living victorious lives in persecution. Our question also was this: Is it possible to live a victorious life in the midst of a Western world that seems to suggest that followers of Jesus are entitled to everything? In persecution, things are often black and white. In persecution, evil and good seem clearly delineated. In the West, however, there is so much “good” it is almost impossible to surrender some of those “good things” so that we might choose the “pearl of great price.”

We would never presume to suggest Dmitri had it easy! But the interviews clearly show a frightening truth: When believers in persecution are rescued and resettled in the West, the faith they fought to express so vigorously in persecution diminished greatly (and quickly) under the noise of Western consumerism. Could it be that serving Jesus in the Western world might be even harder than serving Jesus where persecution is the norm? In either setting, we are convinced the need for victorious living, though difficult, is possible for one who seeks to be a true follower of Jesus and not just a member of a church. And we are also convinced that believers in settings of relative freedom have the most to learn from believers in persecution. These are just a few of the lessons we can learn.

Review and Discussion Questions

- a. Read the Dmitri's story again and write down every attitude, habit or characteristic of Dmitri that made him a "victorious" believer.
- b. At what point and specifically around what concern did Dmitri's resolve started to falter? How did that concern relate to the circumstances that had led him to start Bible study and singing at home in the first place? Did God honor this concern of his? How?
- c. Looking deep into yourself, what concern do you think constitutes the most vulnerable area that might seriously test your resolve in front of persecution? Explain.

3. Strength to endure: personal characteristics

There are typical traits in personal faith, practice, and community that characterize and accompany the victorious experience of those persecuted for their faith

Dr. Ripken draws on his powerful and humbling meeting with Dmitri, and on subsequent interviews with other believers, to identify characteristics that help believers stand strong even in the face of extreme suffering and persecution. In this section we consider personal characteristics, and in the next section we consider characteristics of supporting communities.

a. Knowing Jesus

Believers living victorious lives in persecution know Jesus. Their faith is neither distant nor abstract. Their faith is real, and Jesus is real. The relationship between Jesus and His followers is rich and vital and alive. Believers in persecution know Jesus and they live daily with Him. These believers have not traded a relationship with Jesus for a religion, a denomination, or a political party. Believers we have interviewed reveal their close walk with Jesus in their voices, on their faces, and through their body language. These believers model for us how we have little need to attack governments or denigrate other religious figures. Our task is to simply lift up Jesus. When Jesus is "lifted up," people are drawn to Him and to His kingdom. Our interviews have reminded us of something we already know well: There is no one like Jesus!

b. Praying and fasting

Believers living victorious lives in persecution know firsthand the power of prayer and fasting. Dmitri's seamless transition from conversation with another human being to conversation with God illustrates the power and the reality of prayer in his life. We noticed this same seamless transition repeatedly in our interviews. Both talking to and listening to God are vital, daily realities for those who live victorious lives. These believers speak to Jesus as a trusted friend who listens; they commune with a God who answers. They submit to His leadership when He says, "No," "Yes," or "Wait."

I was asked to leave a day early from a South Eastern Asian country because a believer I was to interview felt he was being followed. I readily agreed to his security concerns. Some other believers would be taking me to the airport. As we were driving to the

airport early the next morning, the driver of the car began driving erratically through various back alleys. Seeing the look of concern in my eyes, he smiled and told me not to worry. He had heard through the spiritual grapevine a leader from the hill country had returned to the capital city late the night before, and he wanted me to meet him. We drove through many back streets until we came to a ramshackle apartment with wooden stairs attached loosely to the outside of the apartment.

As the three of us climbed to the third floor, poised to knock on the door of the apartment, the door suddenly opened and there stood the believer from the hill country. The man said, "While I was praying this morning, the Holy Spirit told me you were coming. So I fixed breakfast." We entered the room and there was the breakfast table with food prepared and four place settings already arranged. We want to pray like that!

As we have heard from scores of interviews, we want to pray and set the table in obedience to what God says to us. We want to pray and then travel to the airport to pick up the visitors the Holy Spirit has told us were coming. We want to pray simply to see God glorified. We want to pray and then find ourselves standing beside the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot. We want to pray and believe God hears and answers us through our conversations with Him!

The spiritual discipline of fasting is also important. We met some believers in persecution who practiced fasting as much as four days a week. It is not clear whether the prayer and fasting resulted in the intimate relationship with God or if the intimate relationship with God resulted in increased prayer and fasting, but it is clear to us the two things are closely tied together. It is hard to deny believers in persecution their food for the day as punishment when believers are already fasting! This practice of focusing on God through fasting is virtually absent from sermons and the daily lives [in many of our churches, especially] of Western believers.

c. Worshipping from the heart

In similar fashion, believers living victorious lives in persecution have committed large amounts of indigenous music to memory. Believers in persecution rely on their heart songs—the music of faith that speaks to them and tells their story. They sing their songs as expressions of faith and as acts of worship. The songs belong to them, and they are not imported from other cultures. This music is vital for the survival of faith in situations of persecution.

A [Muslim Background Believer] was arrested by his government because of his faith in Jesus. In jail, he continued practicing his faith daily by praying, reciting Bible stories to himself, and by singing his praises to God. There were eight guards responsible for him, sharing shifts of eight hours apiece, two guards at a time. After about ten days, one set of guards came to him. They were quite angry and a bit afraid. They said to the believer, "You must stop singing those songs." Puzzled, he asked why they were making such an unusual request. They explained: "The songs you are singing are so powerful they are going to convert us. Then we will become Christians also and we will be in the same cell with you!"

There are few disciplines in the life of believers more vital than singing God's praises, especially singing God's Word back to Him. And the songs must be in the local

language, locally written, and set in the local style. Christian music transliterated from the outside seemingly does not give one victorious living in persecution. Developing heart songs from within the local culture is extremely important, non-negotiable.

If, during an interview, local believers shared with us the songs they sing in worship and in their own prayer time, and if those songs were imported from outside, we knew one of two things. Either these believers had not been through enough suffering to write their own heart songs, or they had gone through persecution armed only with Western, outsider music. In that case, we knew they had probably stumbled and fallen without experiencing victorious living in their persecution. Personal, indigenous heart songs are simply this important. Each and every culture needs to sing their own hard-won heart songs to Jesus. Each generation also needs its own heart songs... Believers in persecution have taught us that each and every generation must have their own heart songs.

d. Accepting persecution as normal

Believers living victorious lives in persecution accept the fact that their persecution is normal. Persecution for them is not an indication they have done something wrong. In contrast, persecution can well be an indication witness has been shared powerfully!

Faithful living and faithful witness lead to and result in persecution. Persecution is the inevitable result of faithfulness. Believers in persecution expect persecution and they see it as normal, predictable, and unavoidable. They do not seek persecution, but they are not surprised when it comes. Persecution is simply a by-product of faith. Often, if we notice unexpected and unusual persecution, we discover unexpected and unusual faith has exploded in that location.

e. Enjoying freedom in Christ

Believers living victorious lives in persecution have claimed their freedom. They understand they are always free to share their faith in any setting. They also understand there are consequences for their witness, but they know no one can take their freedom to share their faith away from them. The freedom to share their faith is a freedom God Himself grants, and believers in persecution will relinquish their biblical freedom to no one.

It was one of my worst days in Somaliland. I needed a word from the Lord. His answer came through the strange medium of a BBC radio broadcast, by a woman who was single, a member of the British Parliament, and Jewish by faith. She was speaking on the Ten Commandments, specifically the one which says, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8). It was her suggestion the Western world does not understand this commandment and that we have virtually neutered the power of this chiseled-in-stone word of God. In a strong voice over the shortwave radio she proclaimed, "When Moses read the commandment on remembering the Sabbath day, a shout, a cry of exquisite joy, would have rung out throughout the land from all of the Jews." Her point was this was the first time in human history where Almighty God had proclaimed that His people were to be free, because only those who were free could choose to have a Sabbath day! No more could Israel blame Egypt for not worshipping the one true God. It was now their responsibility to claim their own freedom and set

aside a day for worship—a day that declares for all time that God’s people are free. Have you claimed your freedom?

f. Overcoming fear

Believers living victorious lives in persecution refuse to be controlled by fear. Fear of consequences and fear of persecution do not prevent them from obeying Jesus and being faithful. They have already given their lives to Christ, so they refuse to fear those who can only kill the body (Matthew 10:28). In some cases, these faithful believers simply choose not to be afraid. In other cases, they are very afraid but choose to be faithful and obedient regardless. Believers in persecution understand that fear of persecution is often worse than the persecution itself, and they determine not to let such fear inhibit their obedient response to Christ’s call.

Victorious believers in persecution refuse to be defined by fear. They desire to be defined by faith and obedience. Two Muslim Background Believers, one old and one younger in two different countries, claimed there are 366 verses in the Bible related to fear. This was their testimony, “God has given us a verse for each day of the year and an extra verse in case we have a really bad day.”

God took a great risk in the Garden of Eden when He gave humankind a choice between good and evil. At times, we have not made the best of choices. Yet the one thing Satan can never take from us is our ability to choose. We can choose not to be afraid, we can choose joy, and we can always choose Jesus. Our fear is perhaps the greatest tool in Satan’s arsenal. Satan cannot be everywhere at once. He cannot know everything. He does not possess all power. Through our fear, though, Satan can hold us captive. Our fear allows him to be in many places at one time. Our fear provides him with knowledge and power. Believers who are victorious in persecution have claimed their freedom in Christ and, because of that freedom, are losing their fear.

4. Strength to endure: characteristics of a supporting community

In addition to personal characteristics that have helped individual believers to stand strong and endure victoriously through hardship and persecution, Nik Ripken has identified key characteristics of the community of believers that are also vital if believers are to endure.

g. Memorising Scripture

Believers living victorious lives in persecution can re-create large portions of the Bible from memory. Believers in persecution love God’s Word. They memorize it. They meditate on it. They devour His Word. They have re-created large portions of the Bible orally; God’s Word is written on their hearts. As important as God’s written Word is, believers in persecution know their oral Bible is all they will be allowed to take into prison with them. Believers in persecution suggest the Bible you know by heart is in actuality, your Bible. God’s Word is so much a part of who they are, it can never be taken from them.

Believers in persecution have learned from Jesus and from each other how to handle the Bible orally. When witnessing opportunities arise or when persecutors are attempting to extract information from a believer, these believers often answer each and every question with a Bible story. When they are asked a question about the story they have just shared, they will simply tell another Bible story.

Persecutors of God's children do not allow Bibles in prison. It is the Word of God deeply imprinted on a believer's heart and mind that allows the believer to thrive through persecution. Followers of Islam sometimes complain, when they ask us a biblical question, believers have to find our Holy Book, look up a specific verse in the concordance in the back of the Bible, and then answer their question.

Eight believers came from a harsh Central Asian country. All of them were oral communicators and they had led thousands of people to Christ. Together, these eight believers knew about twenty stories from the Bible. Somehow, they had encountered just enough stories to hear about Jesus, to believe in Him, to be baptized, and then to form hundreds of house churches. We were able to visit together for five days. During this time, whenever they asked us a question, we would answer with a Bible story. They would then discuss this story among themselves. Then they would retell the story to each other several times while telling their own stories which seemed to parallel the biblical accounts. This went on for five days. They left our time together with fifty or more stories from the Bible.

One in their group could read. He had a Bible in hand and he would authenticate the Bible stories that were being recited from memory. After the telling of each story, he would look at the story in the Book and then confirm what they had heard was actually recorded in Scripture and accurately shared. Possessing the Bible in literate forms is non-negotiable. Freeing the Bible, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to be shared in oral forms is also non-negotiable. The main debate here is not between literacy and orality. The main point is the power of the Holy Spirit and the utter centrality of Scripture both oral and literate forms. In settings of persecution, though, often only an oral Bible will suffice for the majority of believers, backed up by the Bible in literate form.

h. Belonging to the family

Believers living victorious lives in persecution know that they are prayed for and they were not forgotten. We were constantly overwhelmed to see the reaction as believers in persecution learned they had not been forgotten, other believers knew of their suffering, and thousands of believers around the world were praying for them. This awareness was more than encouraging; it was life giving and, sometimes, faith saving.

Often when we finally reached a clandestine location for interviewing believers in persecution, their initial reaction was one of shock, disbelief, and then tears. They were moved to the depths of their souls when they heard we had not forgotten them, that believers in other places had never ceased to pray for them.

Please take this to heart. Believers in persecution do not make it through persecution by themselves. Victorious living in persecution is experienced when the Body of Christ carries on their prayerful shoulders those suffering parts of the Body to the throne of God. Believers in persecution are victorious often through your prayers. Can it be that

you may decide if a believer is victorious in another part of the globe, as they languish in a dark jail cell or as they are beaten, due to your prayers on their behalf? What a challenge. What a privilege. This is the Body of Christ.

i. Trusting others for loved ones

Believers living victorious lives in persecution are certain the local believing community will care for their families. Even in prison, persecuted believers have absolute confidence their families will be cared for while they are not able to do so. This is not merely a hope; it is a certainty. And our interviews indicate how the local faith community proved itself time and again to be faithful at this point of need.

When a pastor, elder, deacon, evangelist, or church planter is visited in prison, the first question asked by their visitor is typically: “How are you doing?” Strangely, such a question is never answered. Instead, the prisoner shifts the conversation emotionally in another direction: “How is my wife? How are my children?” Visitors who represent the Body of Christ reply to the imprisoned believer, “Your job is to be obedient to Jesus while you are in prison. Our job is to take care of your family as long as you are in prison. Please, you do your job and let us do ours.” Knowing their families are taken care of gives imprisoned believers confidence to stand firm.

j. Knowing the suffering is for Jesus' sake

Believers living victorious lives in persecution understand their suffering is for Jesus' sake. They understand their pain is not something they have taken on themselves. Rather, they understand in their innermost being their suffering is for Jesus and for His gospel. Some Westerners went to a very restrictive country. Though very new to the whole persecuted world, they did their best in a hostile setting. Though doing their best, they were arrested by Islamic fundamentalists and placed in a primitive prison. Western media, even some Christian organizations, turned on these young women, blaming them for their persecution at the hands of the fundamentalists! The suggestion was even made to those who had been arrested that their sending organization should apologize to their persecutors for what had happened.

This is neither God's will nor God's way. Even if we make mistakes in our witness, we must remember that the only witness God cannot use is no witness! Ultimately, there is no such thing as a worthless or bad witness. At the same time, what we are trying to do in this book is to suggest we give Satan as little opportunity as possible to take our good deeds and turn them into something destructive. Whenever a brother or sister is persecuted, no matter how such persecution has come about, we look our brother or sister in the eye, we hold them in our arms, and we say, “What has happened to you is for Jesus' sake and we are so proud of you.” We can then stand back and watch how the Holy Spirit strengthens our brothers or sisters in persecution and grants them renewal, hope, and strength. We can never blame those persecuted for what the persecutors do to them! We simply invite the Holy Spirit to teach those in persecution how to become wise partners in evangelism and church planting.

k. Remembering those who've gone before

Believers living victorious lives in persecution have a genealogy of faith. Hearing story after story of faithful obedience, biblical in proportion, I cried out, "Where did you learn to live like that? Where did you learn to die like that?" The answer was always the same: "I learned it from my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather. I learned it from my mother, my grandmother, my great-grandmother." They beat him, starved him, and humiliated him in prison for seventeen years. His experiences included all the physical and psychological tortures that history records. Yet he sang every day in prison even while bloodied and discouraged. He was imprisoned right up to the disintegration of the USSR.

Today, his son is a chaplain in the prison where his father was held for almost two decades. Where did this young man learn to live and die as a follower of Jesus? He learned it from his daddy. Obviously, first-generation believers from largely unreached areas will not have such a genealogy of faith and churches have not been birthed. You might be part of this group. You might have little Bible and few songs of the faith. Believers around you might be scattered, alone, and afraid. Maybe you think you have no one to pray for them, to visit you when in jail, or to take care of your family. You feel you have to face persecution alone.

Realize this, we have a genealogy of faith from Scripture. This is a non-negotiable, biblical genealogy of faith that links you to the faithful and obedient people of God from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation. Know this: this is how the people of God have always lived and died, and this is now how you will live and die as one of God's people. We have the responsibility to show them, from our own lives, how to live and die.

A second challenge is for those who are born Christians in the Middle East or North Africa. Like the apostle Paul who encouraged others to imitate his life, we should have the courage to say to first-generation believers, coming from the majority faith: "If you want to know how God's people live and if you want to know how God's people die, look at me. Watch me. Imitate me." It would be difficult to imagine a higher calling or a greater responsibility. But this is at least a significant part of our calling.

5. Conclusion

The eleven characteristics outlined in the previous two sections are those found by Dr. Ripken to apply in the lives of believers who lived victoriously through persecution. More than simply being "characteristics for other people," this list becomes for us a challenging call to victorious faith in our own setting. This list must be a convicting and challenging tool for self-evaluation in our lives and churches.

This lesson is not meant to simply be a catalogue of victorious living in persecution. The characteristics identified are reminders to us of biblical imperatives, guiding believers in Jesus for all times and in all places. Believers have paid huge prices through persecution in order to share with us their lives' lessons above. We must respond to this holy material with the respect, gratitude, and action as we resolve, with God's help, to learn from and follow their example in living victoriously for Jesus.

Review and Discussion Questions

- a. Review the eleven signs of victorious living listed in the lesson.
- b. Consider the heroes of faith highlighted in Hebrews 11.
 - (i) Which of the eleven signs of victorious living are evident in the lives of these heroes?
 - (ii) Which of the eleven characteristics are already evident within your church or fellowship group?
 - (iii) If you are married and have a family, which of these characteristics are evident in the life of your family, your children?
 - (iv) Which of these characteristics are evident in your own life?
- c. If you see that some characteristics of a victorious life are missing in your church, family or own life, write down for each issue three things you can do to improve in these areas. The first step should always be to pray – can you think of three further practical steps can you take?
- d. What two of the characteristics mentioned in the above section you find most valid and helpful as you reflect on your personal experience with opposition and suffering. And, which two you find least relevant? Explain.

Additional Reading

Fernando, Ajith: *The Call to Joy and Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry*, Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007. Chapter 2 (A Forgotten Treasure) and Chapter 5 ("Faith and Endurance")

Lesson Ten Evaluation

Evaluation Test

Evaluate the church you serve. Write an action plan detailing the steps that should be taken in order to improve the resilience of your church in times of pressure and persecution.

Bibliography

Fernando, Ajith. *The Call to Joy and Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry* Wheaton: Crossway Books, (2007)

Ripken, Nik, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected*, B&H Publishing Group, 2013.

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