

Paul Lawler:

Hi, this is Paul Lawler, pastor of Christ Church Birmingham, having the opportunity to serve Christ for over 31 years in pastoral ministry. And I'm with Al Henson today, founder of the Compassionate Hope Foundation, and also one who served as a pastor for over 45 years. And this is SageTalk.

As you join us today, we're going to take a slightly different approach to today's broadcast. This Sunday is International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And so, we're going to dedicate our broadcast this week to exploring and journeying into this topic together. And as we do, I want to remind you of a couple of things that I think are really important for framing our conversation. First of all, there has been recently, a 14% rise in the number of Christians persecuted around the world in this day and time. And then, secondly, according to Open Doors, one in nine Christians experience high levels of persecution worldwide. And this is sobering statistic. But every single day, according to the research of Open Doors, 11 Christians die, they're martyred for their faith.

Now, Al, as I've noted, I will note from time to time in these broadcasts, we both spend time in different parts of the world, and much of that time is among persecuted believers, and I think even more so in your ministry. And there's some observations I'd like to share today. And I've been present with you in parts of Asia where we've been in rooms with a group of... a gathering of believers, and you've asked some questions that have... the responses have really pierced my heart.

One of those questions is... I've been with you in a setting, I think there were 60 believers gathered, and you asked the question, "How many of you have been in prison for your faith?" And half the hands in the room went up in the air. And then, you asked this question, "How many of you have had a husband, a loved one, martyred, killed, because of their testimony of Jesus Christ." And I would see five or six hands go up in the room. I've watched you weep with these people, precious people. I've watched you hold their hands. I've watched you walk with them as a brother, as a spiritual father. And Al, it's moved my own heart, what I've witnessed, both in them and in you.

And as the founder of The Compassionate Hope Foundation, I'm mindful of your investment in many... so many of these lives around the world. And as we're on the eve of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, would you share, from the scriptures and your heart, today, around this topic?

Al Henson:

Thank you Paul, and certainly, we really feel... have felt led by God to set aside this podcast to talk about, to honor, and to remember, and encourage you, our brothers and sisters, to stop with us and ponder and consider our brothers and sisters across the world, even today, that are suffering for the Lord, Jesus Christ. And as you said, on this day, there will be 11, that will be martyred. And then, tomorrow, there will be 11 more that will be martyred based on these statistics.

I always love to be guided by scripture. I love to hear what brothers and sisters will share, but I love if it's guided by scripture. And so, Paul, I'd like today, for our conversation to be guided by the word of God. And if you're listening, we're going to turn to the book of Hebrews in chapter 13 and verse three, one simple verse. But it says, in Hebrews in chapter three, of 13 and verse three, "Remember the prisoners, as if chained with them, those who are mistreated, since you yourself are in the body also." When I look at those... this verse of scripture, I see three components to the verse that can guide our conversation. The first component is the component of the word 'remember.'

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: And God is exhorting us. It's not written in the commandment. But it's a strong exhortation to us as followers of Jesus to remember. And the word 'remember,' here, has more than just, "Think about it from time to time," but really let this be something that you're constantly aware of. And the 'remember' means to walk into it enough to be able... when you remember, you just don't remember the persecuted church. You should be able to know stories.

And one of the things we're going to suggest at the end is that you take time to find materials and to read updated stories and go on the internet and find the articles, things that you can read. Because that helps you to remember. It helps you to then... in this kind of remembering, to be touched. And so, this verse talks about remembering, I think we have to do what we need to do and going, praying, reading, being around those who have touched the persecuted, like myself, until it helps us to truly remember. It's not a remember to give just a thought of... emotional thought, but it's a remember to... calls us to some kind of action.

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: Because in the latter part of the verse, it speaks about action. So the first part is remember. The second part of this verse is the who. And the who, here, speaks about those that are in prison, specifically, but it says anyone who has been persecuted or distressed in any kind of way... so persecution goes way beyond just imprisonment.

Paul Lawler: Absolutely.

Al Henson: Obviously, the more intense one is martyrdom, as you mentioned. And, as a brother, I have, in my 30 something plus years walking among the church in persecuted countries, those that I have prayed with, those that I have mentored, those that I have taught the word of God, and loved like a Paul would love a Timothy or a Paul would love a Silas, 19 of those have been martyred. And so, I have helped the widow of my brother. And a part of the work at CHF is to... James says, "Pure religion and undefiled, is to consider and to serve and to

help the orphan and the widow, especially the widow of a martyr, I would think."

So CHF, us, we've had the joy of making sure that widow had food to eat, making sure that widow's children had what they needed to eat, and to educate and I was... through the years, even this morning, and I live with this daily, Paul. Even this morning, I'm getting messages and pictures from a 24-year-old young man who we met at the age of 12 when his father and his mother, who were birthing Christianity, and his older brother, his entire family was martyred, except for him. And if he had been with them, he probably would have been too.

And he was taken into one of the leaders in this area, in this country, into one of their homes of hope at the age of 12. And he has been... he grew up there, got cared for, a good education, and mentored, and developed. And then, he didn't go to college, but he wanted a vocation, and so, he was trained vocationally for seven years in motorcycle repair and car repair and equipment repair. And then, in his last couple of years, "What do you want to do, son?" "I want to go back and take my dad's place."

Paul Lawler: Mercy of the Lord.

Al Henson: And now he has. And because of his youngness, we advised him... because now, where there was no... his dad was the birthing of Christianity in that region. And now, there are 23 churches. Two or three of those may have a building, but most of those are house churches. And so, we've advised him, helped him to buy a motorcycle, gave him a thousand dollars to start his business, so he's self-sustaining. And he's now going from church to church. Because he's had more bible training than... and depth, than most of these pastors.

But he's trying to help them to birth children's ministries, he's helping them to birth youth ministries, and he's taking the teenagers and developing a worship team among the teenagers. And then, while he's doing that, without them knowing it, he's encouraging and equipping the pastors as a younger brother to older brothers in the Lord. And so, this morning, I'm getting pictures from him, and I just write him back and say... He calls me dad. Because he lost his dad, "Dad, just wanted you to know what I was doing." And I say, "Son, I'm proud of you."

Paul Lawler: That's so powerful.

Al Henson: And, "Dad, I love you, dad." And I tried to call him, and he wouldn't get through because of the signal of where he is weak, but this intimate relationship with the persecuted. This morning again, we've had a brother that in January... Where the gospel is permeating is where the persecution happens most. And this brother, in January, was imprisoned, and we've been... since January, taking

rice to his wife and his children. People have been giving for that and caring for his wife and his children.

And after a month or so, they let some of the pastors visit him. We were able to carry him a good meal and carry him medicines. But I've got pictures of him with his feet chained. We heard stories of him being in the stocks and with his hands in the stocks, his feet in the stocks. And sometimes they won't even release him to relieve himself.

Paul Lawler: Mercy.

Al Henson: And they're trying to get him to sign a document to deny Jesus Christ. And he would not. And so, we've had stories of how they electrically shocked him.

Paul Lawler: God have mercy.

Al Henson: And he would not sign the documents. And the good news is that I got the message this morning. At 4:30 PM, their time, which was 4:30 AM our time, he was released.

Paul Lawler: Thank you God.

Al Henson: But we saw the pictures. The skin of his family's dark brown. When he went in, he had a dark brown skin. It's almost white now. And he was healthy.

Paul Lawler: And I saw this picture too.

Al Henson: Yeah, healthy. And now, he's just bones, skin and bones. I think, I don't know all the details... I think part of the releasing is, they're afraid if they kept him, he would die and his death could then become something that would bring enough attention that it could be difficult for them. But yet, they received a picture this morning, him standing with his wife. He's back home with his family and his kids. We rejoice over that. But Paul, these kinds of things are happening. And this is just today. These pictures coming, I have thousands of stories and hundreds of stories. But I thought today I'd just share what I experienced today-

Paul Lawler: Absolutely.

Al Henson: ... and the back stories to those, brother, remembering these.

Paul Lawler: As we remember, I'm just so aware where our relationship began. First, certainly out of mutual sharing and our journey together in Christ as well as in our respective ministries. But there is also a story related to the persecution the church is going through in many parts of the world that I think's relevant for today.

And that is, Missy and I, we were serving... and I can name the country on this one, this was a public story. We were in India, and we were a part of sharing the gospel and working with a team planting new churches. And a pastor came to us and wanted to eat a meal with us. And we shared a meal, and he shared... this is a number of years ago. He said, "Paul, have you heard about the persecution in Orissa?" And I had. There were 271... might have been 272 Christians that were martyred in Orissa state. And then, he shared with me, the following. He said, "We have the orphans of those martyrs. We have the children. And we need help taking care of them. Would you help us?" To which we said, over dinner, "Yes, we're not sure how, but we will."

But when we... We both went to sleep that night, and then I woke up about 4:00 AM, and the spirit of God just fell, and I began to weep for these children. Missy heard me weeping. She got up out of bed, came around the bed, sat on my knee, and began to weep. She knew why I was weeping. I knew why she was weeping without a word being spoken. And we knew that God was saying to us in that moment that, "Care for my children."

Al Henson: Yes.

Paul Lawler: So in those moments, we not only became responsive to what was happening with those children in India, but we became... God birthed a vision in our heart to team with you in birthing two homes for children, homes of hope, The Patricia B. Hammonds Homes, which we named in honor of our late mom... my late mom, my brother, Patrick, and I. And Al, I'm sharing this because out of the blood of those martyrs, God birthed a catalytic movement in our own heart to care for the least of these among the persecuted. And I'm just so aware that as you shared that story of that 12 year old boy that was in one of the Homes of Hope, who was not only provided for, but he's disciplined, and he grows up, and now he's influencing serving the cause of Christ.

Al Henson: Well, we've always known, it's always been true through church history, that wherever persecution is taking place, you will see and experience the greatest growth in the kingdom. And I believe the answer to the reason why that is, is because their willingness to suffer for the cause of Christ and suffer for the name of Christ, authenticates true faith.

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: Because if it was just some religion or some do's and don'ts, then they would not be willing to suffer like this. And I think that... excuse me... I've been crying here, so I'm choking some. I'm sorry. The other thing is Satan is promoting the false religions. He's behind those, but true Christianity is... Satan is the enemy to that. And so, that's why you don't hear of persecution of other religious people. It's a good thing just to ponder, consider why.

Paul Lawler: I agree.

Al Henson: And the reason why Christianity... Christians, followers of Jesus are persecuted is because the prince of this world-

Paul Lawler: That's right.

Al Henson: ... hates God and hates the followers of God. And so, persecution is taking place. I think just... I want to share two things in observation. And you've seen this, Paul. When you're around those that are being persecuted, you would think, "Oh, they're going to be so sad."

Paul Lawler: I know where you're going.

Al Henson: "Oh, they're going to be self-pity, poor me," or they're going to be hopeless. And the opposite is true. I have seen the purest joy serving and working with the persecuted than anywhere I have in Christianity.

Paul Lawler: Amen.

Al Henson: Actually, I had one of our board members at CHF and one of our key donors was with me on a trip. And we were in a gathering like you spoke about. About 40 or 50 pastors and some of their wives were present. And they were so happy and worshipping for about a day or so. And finally, he comes and says, "Al, I've heard you tell all of these stories. I'm struggling believing them."

Paul Lawler: Yes.

Al Henson: So I said to him... I said, "Okay, we'll see." Because there were seven brothers in this meeting that I had never met before. I knew where they were from. I'd heard of them, but I'd never met them before. And so, I ask our leader there... Between some of our sessions, I ask, "Could we gather these seven?" I gather them out back where it was a little cooler. Inside that room was hot, but we gathered where it was a little cooler under a tree and a breeze. I remember feeling really good to be cool. And I said, "Okay."

And I looked at my brother, the board member, and I said, "Okay, I don't know. I don't know these men." And I was thinking, "Please, God, I don't want to be made out to be a liar." But so, I said, "How many of you seven men have been in prison?" And her was what was... they all lifted their hands, all seven of them. And then, when they lifted their hands, they started laughing.

And for them to remember that they had had the joy of suffering for Christ and remembering the lessons that they had learned and the growth that they had had and how God used that to build his kingdom, they were just happy. Even Peter... You remember Peter says, "I rejoice that I was counted worthy to suffer for the Lord, Jesus Christ." And so, that was... I was saying, "Thank you, God." Not thanking God that they had suffered, but thanking God that he was authenticating the reality of the suffering of Christ. The second thing that I'd like

to say is that being there, watching this, you do see more of the miraculous movements of God, not only in the gospel-

Paul Lawler: I agree.

Al Henson: ... but I remember once, I was leaving a scene of the widow of a martyr. Her husband had been brutally martyred about three weeks prior. And I had come to visit her. And all she knew, because her husband had said, "There's this servant of God that really has blessed my life." And so, she had... when I heard of his martyrdom, I wanted to go meet her. And I wanted to say to her, "Your husband has spoke of me. I was... I am the Lord's servant. And I am your husband's servant. And I am here to serve you and to serve your children. And I represent thousands. And the spirit that have come with me, you are not alone."

And that's the whole story. I won't take time to tell, but I want to tell the story after that to tell you how God's spirit moves miraculously. We knew we were risking ourselves to go into this region of the country. And so, we leave. And three or four kilometers away, in the vehicle we're traveling in, I'm sitting in the back, and up front is our national driver and our national translator. So they're nationals. And three vehicles stop us, and always, our national driver... this had occurred before, but he would always be able to get out. Because they wanted documents and do that and not let them look in the vehicle.

Paul Lawler: You were talking about officials?

Al Henson: Officials, yeah, and they were heavily armed. But two of them come past him, and one comes over to the window and shines the light in. And he says something to the translator in their language. And they chat just a moment. And then, he brings his light around the back of the vehicle and around me. And I realized his eyes never stopped. He never saw me. With a light on me, looking straight at me, he never saw me. And so, within a few minutes, we were on our way.

And I was thanking God, "Wow." And so, a few hours later, I called home, and I'm telling my wife, Susan, about this incident. She starts weeping. She says, "You won't believe this. God, three hours ago... God told me to call everybody I knew, to send messages out, and specifically to pray this prayer, 'God, help my husband Al, to be visible to those that he needs to be visible to and to help him to be invisible to those that he needs to be invisible to.'" And I said, "Well, thank you for listening to God. God... Tell everybody God heard their prayers."

Paul Lawler: That's so beautiful.

Al Henson: So it's amazing how I've watched the healings of God and the miracles of God as well as the moving forward of the Gospel of God around the persecuted church.

- Paul Lawler: Yeah, I want to make a statement. I want you to know that I don't believe it's literally true, but it illustrates a principle. Somebody once said, "There's a revelation of God that the persecuted church may have that the prosperous church never will have."
- Al Henson: I believe that.
- Paul Lawler: I'm not saying that it's impossible for someone who's prosperous not to hunger for God and experience revelation from God, but it is clear, just even by that story that you just shared, that God does move among the poor in spirit.
- Al Henson: Amen.
- Paul Lawler: And as he moves, he does demonstrate his glory and strength to stand even in persecution and know his joy and his peace.
- Al Henson: I know our time is about up, Paul, and we gained a little permission to maybe push this one a few extra minutes. But I want to go to the third part of the verse before you close this out.
- Paul Lawler: Okay, all right.
- Al Henson: If that's okay.
- Paul Lawler: Sure.
- Al Henson: Because the third part of the verse gives us the why. And it says, "There, as being yourselves, also in this body." So the two things I would like to say... what it's saying here, remembering these because you are in the body with them. So these are not just your brothers and sisters. They're not just your fellow warriors and soldiers in the kingdom. They are a member of the body. If you're the right arm, they may be the left arm.
- Paul Lawler: Yes.
- Al Henson: And if you know anything about the body, if the left arm is hurting, the whole body is hurting.
- Paul Lawler: That's right, that's right.
- Al Henson: And so, this verse is teaching us to cherish them and treasure them as a part of your... of the body that you're a part of. And when they're hurting, feel their hurt, and when they are rejoicing, rejoice with them. So that's the first why in the passage. The second one is a little more hidden, but is to me, the crowning why. "The body, this is Christ the body."

And I'd like my brothers and my sisters, don't click out, think with me just a moment. If Jesus, physically, could be upon the Earth today, and if you heard that he had been beaten, and you knew that he's been released, he's wounded, he's bleeding, he's hurting, and he's released, and he's on the other side of the world, after knowing his love for you and that he's died for you and buried and rose and all that he's done, all of us would get on a plane and go to the other side of the world and tend to his wounds, just like they did at the cross after he had died.

We know we would. I would. What an honor. I'd empty my bank accounts out to get to Jesus to take care of him. Well, this is... we are, this is, they are the body... the body, I want to say that again, the body of Jesus.

Paul Lawler: Yes, that's so good.

Al Henson: They are the body of Christ. And this is what Jesus refers to, part of what he's referring to in Matthew 25 when he says... remember that he said... It's at the judgment seat, and those to his right he's bringing into heaven. And they say, "Why us?" And he says, "Well, when I was thirsty, you gave me water to drink. And when I was hungry, you fed me. And when I was in prison..." There it is, "When I was in prison..." so the story that I told about this brother being in prison, the body of Christ was in prison, "And when I was in prison, you came. You came and you visited me. And because you've done..." and this is, by the way, the brand of CHF, the heart of CHF. Caring for, rescuing the least of these, that what we... We're about the least of these. And we've done it unto the least of these. And that is the exploited children, the trafficked, the orphaned, the widow, but it is also the persecuted church. And so, this is the why. Oh, so I think, oh... it's not a burden. What a joy-

Paul Lawler: Amen.

Al Henson: ... that I have had. And I want you, my brother and sister to have, to be able to bind up the wounds of the body of Jesus.

Paul Lawler: Al, that's said so beautifully and compellingly... and so, as we wrap up today... Let's offer a few ways that a person could respond to what they may hear the Lord saying today as we've shared this time together. First of all, we want to suggest, on your own, take some time to do some reading and research to gain the heart of God... God's perspective for the persecuted church. And some of this could involve some Google searches, Voice of the Martyrs, Open Doors, also look at their resource pages around books and reading that you can do to inform you in terms of the pulses of the persecuted church around the world.

Now, maybe I should've mentioned this one first, but the next one is pray. Pray for the persecuted church. When you pray for people... pray for a group of people, you often also glean the heart of God in that. So I want to encourage you to get in prayer and intercession for our persecuted sisters and brothers

around the world. And then, the third this is there are many dynamic organizations that are ministering to, supporting, undergirding the persecuted church in different parts of the world. But I do want to mention the one that we're affiliated with, and that's the Compassionate Hope Foundation.

And I too... you've heard Al share stories, but I too have been on the front lines with Al in parts of the world, where, as we shared in the opening... where ministry is happening among the persecuted with children, adults, really people of all ages. And you can make a difference in helping resource the clothing, the feeding, the materials that are needed for propagating the gospel and sustaining and strengthening the church and discipling people of all ages to impact their culture and cultures. And so, you can go to CompassionateHope.org and not only find out great information about all that God is doing through Compassionate Hope Foundation, but you also can see that there are ways to give and support this ministry as lives are touched and transformed.

Al Henson: I might say there, Paul, they won't find a lot on our website about the persecuted church. The reason being is that we can't say much publicly. And so, if they go, there's ways to give there, but if they just would leave their information and like to speak to someone further about how they could be involved, would be very helpful also.

Paul Lawler: That's excellent, and a good point of clarity. And then, the final thing that we would mention as well is, in your lifetime, seize an opportunity to go with some gospel centered organization and serve on the front lines alongside our persecuted sisters and brothers so that you have an opportunity to open your own eyes in a special way, to be informed and empowered to serve this cause for Christ at such a time as this. Al, as you've taken the lead in so much of our conversation today, share closing comments and our prayer, closing prayer today for our time together.

Al Henson: I think I'll just pray. Jesus, we love you, Lord. And if we love you, we love your body, and so we also love the church. And we love our brothers and sisters. And we take time, even now... And brothers and sisters you're listening, would you just join me in praying? We take time right now, and we lift up our brothers and sisters around the world. You see every one of them right now. You feel their pain, you feel their suffering, you weep with them Lord. And we ask that your grace would be upon them and your comfort would be upon them.

And we pray, father, that you would protect where it is your will to protect and you would provide where it is your will and way to provide, oh, father, we pray for our brothers and sisters that are around the world. And then, we pray, father, for each brother and sister that's listening, Lord. We pray, father, that you would take what has been shared, and we pray that you would touch their heart with your heart for the persecuted church. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Episode 5: Praying for the Persecuted Church | SageTalk Podcast

Paul Lawler: Amen.