

Global Missions Conference 2025
Remember the Persecuted Church
Hebrews 13:3
Tony Wang

Good evening, Briarwood. My name is Tony Wang and I am the pastor of Grace Irvine Church, which is located in Irvine, California. I'm a supported church planter by Briarwood, and by God's grace. We have planted Grace Irvine, the first PCA Chinese congregation on the West Coast. I pray this will be a starting point of a church planting movement that will reach the millions of Chinese immigrants in this country by planting gospel centered churches.

It is my privilege to be here to be part of this global missions conference. Pastor Brian Wintersteen has been very gracious. I'm very thankful for him and for Briarwood. Let's turn to the Word of God for today's sermon. Today. We're going to look at Hebrews 13:3. Let's turn to the book of Hebrews 13. We're going to look at one verse today. That's verse three.

Let me read this passage to you.

Remember those who were in prison as those in prison with them and those who were mistreated Since you also are in the body.

Would you pray with me? Our gracious Heavenly Father, we ask you to speak to our hearts. Even as we are studying only one verse today. We ask for your illumination. It is our desire that we may be conformed to the image of Your Son, Jesus Christ, enjoying his mission to reach the nations and to make disciples. And we know that only you can do so by your grace, through the work of your spirit. Be with us today and give us grace. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. Amen.

Born and raised in China, I became a believer while growing up in a Christian home. I have been a part of unregistered churches in China and have stayed connected with my pastor friends. When I hear stories of persecution that took place in China, especially over the last decade, I think of this verse that we just read. Ministries in the context here in the United States can be very different. I have to admit, I need this verse. I need this verse to bring back to me the biblical perspective on persecution, which I sometimes forget and to reignite in my heart a desire for global missions. Before I dive into the Scripture passage today, I'd like to tell you a story. A good friend of mine, a church planter in Shanghai, China, once share something with me during one of our regular conversations. His story deeply moved me, and I want to share it with you today. My pastor friend told me before worship each Sunday, they gather a staff and volunteers and pray for the service. A common practice for a lot of churches also, but their prayer is far from common. Each Sunday before the service, they ask the Lord to give them one more Sunday. One more Sunday to proclaim the gospel. One more Sunday to worship

the Triune God. One more Sunday to baptize new believers. One more Sunday to extend God's grace to all. One more Sunday every single week. They pray this prayer because they know any Sunday could be their last. Ministry in the United States comes with its own challenges. Yet stories like these from persecuted brothers and sisters, give me a fuller picture of what the Lord is doing in his church. We need to know about them, pray for them, support them, and be encouraged by them. One more Sunday. The urgency to declare the good news of Jesus Christ is often missing in our life and our ministry here. While we may take our Sunday gatherings for granted, they pray each week just for one more Sunday.

I'm exceedingly grateful for our American churches, especially for Briarwood. This church is so committed to mission, and it has a long history of supporting missions to China and to all over the world.

It is my prayer, and I hope that our little church plan grace serve. I will one day reflect broadly what's generosity, especially in missions. Living the U.S. persecution, especially intense religious persecution, seems far away from our life. My goal today is to direct us back to the biblical perspective on this topic, and to reignite in us a heart for missions.

Our Lord calls us to remember those who are suffering for their faith, for our faith. Those who are suffering for the sake of their faith are in fact, our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are of one body, in one faith.

Did you know that last year 4476 Christians were killed for faith related reasons? On average, that is, 12 Christians killed every day for their faith.

Did you know that? 380 million Christians experienced high levels of persecution on this day. That is, every seven believers in this world, one is facing severe persecution.

Did you know that 7679 churches were attacked last year? Over 200,000 Christians were forced to leave their homes.

Did you know that more Christians were killed for their faith in the 20th century than in the previous 19th centuries? Combined?

Did you know that each Sunday, including today, as we worship in peace, approximately 200 churches in China face harassment in just a matter of hours ago. A number of them worshipping for the very last time is a church.

When we consider the topic of persecution, many of us, including myself, may find it hard to relate to. Although I was born and raised in China, it was 15 years ago when I last lived in China. As a resident. My parents became believers when I was a little kid. The first thing they did after they became Christians was that they started to take me to church.

When I left in China in 2010, I thought things were getting better. I thought religious freedom was finally going to be given to the Chinese Christians. I thought I could freely go back to China to engage in ministry. I was wrong.

Until one day in 2015, the underground seminary where I used to teach was raided while my students were gathering in Shanghai to take a seminary course. In 2016, authorities started to install facial recognition cameras in all the registered state churches and banned anyone under the age of 18 to attend church. In 2018, my former pastor from Orlando was deported from China on a mission trip there.

And in 2019, the persecution against early Reign Presbyterian Church in Chengdu and the nine year sentence of Pastor Wang Yi and many more. After that.

As one person writes, persecution is not just a historical atrocity, it's a current reality. It is currently taught in the Scripture that there will always be persecutions. Our Lord Jesus said so himself a servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. Ever since the first group of believers Christian Church is a persecuted church throughout the entire church history.

Whether we experience it or not, at this very moment, there will always be persecutions.

That is why Hebrews 13 three is particularly important to us. Remember those who are in prison as those in prison with them, and those who are mistreated. Since you also are in the body. We hear those numbers of statistics when we consider our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world being persecuted, beaten, oppressed, imprisoned, tortured, even killed.

We are, according to this verse. We need to remember them as though we were imprisoned with them, as though we're going through the same persecutions in our bodies. This is an imperative given by the author of Hebrews to us. We are entrusted with a responsibility, a God given responsibility, to remember the persecuted believers around the world. We're exhorted to remember those who are persecuted for the sake of their Christian faith, our Christian faith, even as we worship in this room today.

The meaning of Hebrews 13 three is clear. Believers are given one imperative. That's a word. Remember, we're called to remember those who are in prison. We are called to remember those who are mistreated. Centering on this word, remember. I'm going to ask three questions. Who do we remember? Why do we remember? And how do we remember? First question.

Who do we remember?

The answer is found in the text. Those who are in prison and those who are mistreated.

If we read the context of this verse, this call is given in a broader exhortation that is found in verse one. Let your brotherly love continue.

We might not be surprised with the saying of brotherly love. However, it is in fact a rather abrupt introduction of chapter 13 of the book of Hebrews. The term brotherly love turns up rather infrequently. In the first century, everyday use and it is infrequently used in in the New Testament. The word brotherly love primarily refers to the natural affection among siblings.

However, among early Christians, the term brotherly love is used distinctive distinctively to describe the love that binds together. Members of the church as though believers are truly brothers and sisters. We also know that Jesus himself called his disciples brothers.

His exhortation is to exercise brotherly love. And how do we do so? And to whom do we do so? Remember those who are in prison. Remember those who are mistreated. It is important to realize that those who are in prison, those who are mistreated for the sake of the faith, are indeed our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Think of it this way. If our own brother or sister are suffering because of their faith in Christ, how would we react? If persecution is taking place in our city, to our family, how we react?

We will not need to be reminded to remember them because we will remember them. It will be ever fresh to us as a daily or even hourly need in life. We will think of them or pray for them. We will make every effort to rescue them because they are part of the family.

At the same time, Christians around the world who are suffering for the sake of the gospel are also part of our family. Apostle Paul writes, so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but your fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. We're called to remember those who are persecuted, to love them as brothers and sisters.

Brothers are not more than are more than just a title or a reference.

These believers, they are part of the family, part of the body. I Corinthians 12:26 writes, if one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. Paul's teaching is clear here. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. When one part of the body hurts, we all hurt.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, the body is suffering around the world. Our brothers and sisters are hurting around the world. Sitting back like nothing is going on is not the New Testament picture of being one family in Christ. We follow a King who suffered for our sake and his body around the globe. At any given moment is probably enduring some level of persecution.

I subscribe to China Partnership and organization that is behind the church planning movement in China. On their website, I read a story of another persecuted pastor and I wept. It was a letter that was written by a pastor's wife on the day of their ten year wedding anniversary. The wife and the husband. They were initially detained together, and when she wrote the letter, the wife was released from detention while the husband was kept in prison.

Here's what she wrote on the day of their ten year wedding anniversary.

Every night, as I gaze at your photo and reflect on our marriage, I can't stop crying. I finally understand what David meant in the Psalms where he said, every night I flood my

bed with tears. I change my couch with my weeping. My dear husband. I expected our marriage to include poverty, illness and quarrels. But I never imagined we'll be imprisoned together.

If I had known that. I would have added another life to our wedding vows. For better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Free or imprisoned. To love and to cherish. Till death do us part.

The numbers we listed at the beginning of the sermon. They are not just numbers behind each number is a real person, a real family. And the Lord commands us to remember them. Question number two why do we remember? Why do we remember? Part of the answer was already given when we consider the question number one. The key to answer this question is understanding the second half of the verse.

Remember, those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. There are two ways to understand the meaning of this text. The first explanation is that we need to remember those who are mistreated because we are also members of the body. We need to remember the suffering believers in the world because they are our brothers and sisters.

We need to remember them because we are of one body with them. The second way to understand this verse, and I believe it's a more probable meaning of the text, is that we need to remember those who are mistreated because we also have bodies. We also are of bodily existence, and we also live in this real world of everyday life.

That is the second reason why we need to remember. The exhortation here is in fact as exhortation of imaginative sympathy, which is to be extended to all those who are mistreated for the sake of their Christian faith. Why do we need to remember them? Because, number one, we are also members of the body. And number two, we also have bodies.

We would feel the same ill treatment if persecutions were meted out to us. Remember, those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. I just offer two possible meanings of this text. You can choose either one. You think that it's more probable, but I would like to press a little deeper. The deeper reason why we need to remember the persecuted church is because of Christ.

Christ is a reason behind both explanations. Firstly, Christ our Savior is a reason why we can be members of a body. If we're not for Christ. Those persecuted believers are not brothers and sisters and all of ours. It is in Christ. We become members of one body. It is by union with Christ. We are united with one another.

It is Christ who is the head of the body. We become part of the body. It is Christ who is the only begotten son died for our sake, so that we become adopted children of God. Family with one another. Christ our Savior is the reason why we need to remember the persecuted church. Churches. Secondly, Christ our Savior is the one who is also in the body to remember us.

Without Christ, we will have no salvation, no hope, and no reason to remember at all. It was Christ who did not have a body, assumed to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, so that we could have. So he could save our body and our soul. It was Christ who did not count himself equal with God, humbled himself in order to remember us.

It was Christ who for our sake suffered, beaten, tortured, killed, identified himself fully with us to a point that he took the penalty of all our sins. Christ is the one who is in the body to remember our need. Therefore, he calls us to remember those who are suffering in the body. Why do we need to identify ourselves with the persecuted believers in the world?

Because first and foremost, Christ identified himself with sinners like us. Were to remember the persecuted church because our Lord first remembered us. That's why we remember.

Final question how do we remember?

How do we remember?

I offer the answer in four ways. We learn. We pray. We support. And we expect.

First. We learn. Remember, those who are in prison are also in prison with them. And those who are mistreated. Since you also are in the body.

If we do not even know who are in prison.

If we do not even know who are mistreated, how are we going to remember them?

Of course, there are there are issues of the heart to consider. I think one major and quite simple reason we do not remember well is that we simply are not aware. There are many resources to get information about what persecuted, persecuted Christians in this world are going through. Open doors has been producing World Watch List, which provides information on the top 50 countries where persecutions of Christians are taking place.

Trying to partnership, the mission agency behind the gospel movement in China has been publishing stories of persecuted pastors and churches. These are excellent resources for us to first learn about Christian persecutions.

In the meantime, I truly believe that we need to learn more about the persecuted believers in church and not only for their sake. But also for our own sake. We can be greatly encouraged. In my own personal experience, when I hear the stories of persecution, when I learn about the injustice and the suffocating despair in this world, the gospel became more precious to me.

Now, not only to the to the mind. But more so to my heart.

The King that I follow. The King that I serve as a king who suffered. And his church is suffering. Until he comes again. So the first step is to learn about them. After we learn

about them, we pray for them. We pray for them. Like all the apostles prayed for the persecuted church, record it and ask for we need to pray in the same way.

We need to pray for the boldness of the church. We need to pray that believers would persevere in the midst of persecution. Christians would be bold to take opportunities to share their faith and live out their faith. We need to pray for the honor of Christ. And persecution is happening. It is a name of Christ that is being threatened.

We need to pray that Christ's name be honored even in the middle of a persecution. We need to pray that God's glory be known in all the nations. We need to pray for the advancement of God's kingdom. Thy kingdom come. We trust that God builds up his church and God, in many instances in history, strengthened and extended his church through persecution.

We pray for his Kingdom come as live transformed churches strengthened, cities reached justice, served especially in the seasons of persecution.

I sometimes encourage my Christian friends to pray at a specific time of the day. Forward if you could. I encourage you to do the same. He was searching through as a key verse here 13:3, 13 hours and three minutes. That's 1:03 p.m. 1:31 03 p.m. That's probably during your lunch break before going back to work.

Think of this verse, Hebrews 13:3 and if you could take a bit of your time to remember the persecuted church in your prayer.

The third way to the third way is to support, to support the persecuted churches.

Brothers and sisters, I cannot imagine the gospel movement in China without the support from churches in the West. Year after year, resources have been poured to the training of Christian leaders, to theological education, to pastors gatherings, to scholarships for Chinese students, to

Let's continue to do so. Let's continue to support the persecuted church. Intangible ways. Not only do China, but two churches in Europe, we Africa in the Middle East, in all parts of the globe. The Lord is on a mission to make the name of Jesus known among all the nations. And we are called to join this mission by sending out and supporting missionaries and church planters.

Let's continue to support the global church, especially those that are under resourced and persecuted.

In addition, I would also like to invite you to consider supporting immigrant churches, which can be strategic when it comes to reach the persecuted nations.

As China close its doors for missionary work, we are reaching Chinese population by planting churches in cities where the people are moving to. Since Grace Irvine, our church launched last year, we've seen over 20 people come to the saving faith of Jesus

Christ. Being the first Chinese congregation in the West, on the West Coast, we hope to be a starting point of many more.

We hope the number of ethnic churches in the PCA will grow, and we hope that these churches will grow to be strong in their missional efforts. I know we cannot get there without your support. While we pray and ask the Lord to open the doors of China and other nations again. Let us minister to the immigrant population and help strengthen the churches here.

We learn. We pray with support, and we also do not lose hope. Finally, we expect.

We expect even in the midst of persecution; the Lord is still in control. We expect that all things work together for good.

We expect the outcome is secured by the blood of Jesus. We expect the gospel to succeed. We expect to see one day a great multitude from every nation, from every tribe and people and languages, standing before Christ, praising his name.

Or expect to see a new heaven, a new earth. Come down as the old one passes away.

We expect to see no more persecutions, as he will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

We expect to see our Savior who remembered us, who was persecuted for us, sitting at the throne, fully honored and glorified. As we say to the lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever.

We expect that day to come soon. But until that day comes, father, the Sisters of Prayer would you remember the persecuted churches and get our mission to stand by your side?

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your son, Jesus Christ, who remembered us. Who is in the body with us? For us. We thank you for the hope that we have in the gospel. That even as we see this much persecution, you are still sovereign. You're still building up your church. You are still bringing the nations to you. We ask you, O Lord, to comfort and strengthen your children who are suffering. We ask you, O Lord, to make us a remembering body in the name of the one who firstly remembered us. We pray.

Amen.