

# The Testimonies of Scars – Suffering for Christ’s Mission

## Dr. Richard

### Luke 24-49

It's such an honor to be here tonight. I've been so blessed by Briarwood. Over the years, Brian has didn't actually mention that. Briarwood has also supported multiple projects that we have done among theological education, among pastors and church leaders, among the Iranian population. And we're just so blessed by the vision and the heart that Briarwood has for missions. So greetings to you all. Greetings from Covenant Theological Seminary. I'm no longer full time with mission to the world, but now my full time position is faculty at Covenant Theological Seminary teaching missions. And so I'm very thankful for the opportunity, especially during this week, this this conference, that we can focus our eyes to the nations.

As Brian mentioned, um, some interesting events have happened this weekend. I had written this sermon. My heart has been for Iran and for Iranians for many years, for decades, in fact. And so this sermon I talked about stories of my dear friends among Iranian Christians, and I was in the Saint Louis airport about five o'clock in the morning, ready to fly to Birmingham yesterday, and then opened my phone and saw the news of this war that has broken out in Iran. And so my heart was very heavy. Of my dear friends, and I know how much they love their home country, and to see all the suffering that's going on there. So I simply ask for your prayers, the prayers for what is going on in this population that has longed for decades to be free. And so thank you for the warm welcome here.

Um, as we begin, I'd like to read from our passage today, Luke chapter twenty four, verses thirty six to forty nine, Luke twenty four, verses thirty six to forty nine. Let me read for us as they were talking about these things:

***Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, peace to you. But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. And he said to them, why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself touch me and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones, as you see that I have. And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. And while they still disbelieved for joy, and were marveling, he said to them, have you anything to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them. Then he said to them, these are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, thus it is written that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.***

Word of the Lord.

I remember the first time that I met Iranians. I had just finished my second year in college, and I volunteered to work with a team in Istanbul, Turkey. I took the summer during the college

break to go to Istanbul to with a missions team that was working among Iranian refugees and now Iranians at that time and still today, were leaving Iran in massive numbers, trying to escape the oppression in the harsh conditions. And many of them were entering into Turkey first and just waiting there sometimes for a couple of years, sometimes for several years, waiting to be accepted as an asylum case to the West. So my job for that summer was to simply to live in an apartment full of Iranian refugees and become friends with them. We would just hang out together. We ate together, we cooked together and went on picnics together. We drank a lot of tea together. Now, I was just a college kid at that time. But these Iranians were older than me. But they accepted me as a brother. They all knew that I was a Christian. And so eventually they started to ask me questions about Christianity. Now, I didn't speak any Farsi at that time, but. And most of them didn't speak any English. But there was one man in the apartment who was also an Iranian refugee of a Muslim background. And so they would ask him and he spoke English, and so they would ask their questions to him. He would translate them for me. Do I would do my best to just look in my Bible to find the answer and give the answer back to them? By the end of the summer, we saw six or seven Iranians come to Christ, and I was just blown away to see what God was doing among Iranians. Now, while I was serving among Iranian refugees that summer, there was another side of the Iranian ministry that was also going on in Istanbul. There was an American pastor who had come to Istanbul, and he had arranged for a team of pastors from Iran to come out to meet him in Turkey. Now, I wasn't involved with this training, but I did get to meet the team of pastors who were gathered that summer for training. Now, at the time in the early nineteen nineties, Christianity was growing at an incredible speed in Iran. And so in the early and mid nineties, there was a severe persecution going on by the Iranian government to try to stop this growing church. And so these pastors had come out of Iran at great risk to themselves, but they were it was all worth it to gain this valuable time of ministry training. Now, I wasn't familiar with Iranian names at that time, and so I don't remember most of them. But there was one name that stood out to me because it was so simple, Pastor Haik. Now, it was such an honor to meet Pastor Hike and to meet all of these men who are so sacrificially serving the church in Iran. About six months later, I had gone back to America, gone back to my campus university. Six months later, in the middle of winter, I was at school and I remember going to our local church one Sunday, and during the service, they announced that they're going to have a special time of prayer for the persecuted church. Specifically, they were praying for an Iranian pastor who had been kidnapped by the Iranian government and then stabbed to death for his faith. And his name was Pastor Haik. And I couldn't believe it. This man that I had just met six months before was now martyred for his faith. That was my first experience with Iranians over thirty years ago. And what I learned from that very beginning was the inescapable connection between missions and suffering. Mission simply does not happen without suffering. So if you want to better understand missions, better understand. We also have to understand our role in God's mission. You have to understand also the role of suffering in missions. And so today I want to talk about the role of suffering in missions based on what Jesus taught his disciples in Luke chapter twenty four. And so specifically, I want to focus on three points about suffering.

First of all, Jesus's testimony of suffering.

Second, history's testimony of suffering.

And then finally, your testimony of suffering.

So let's go to our first point, then Jesus's testimony of suffering. Now, our passage here in Luke twenty four, we see the disciples hiding away in the upper room, and they're terrified. They had just seen their Lord and their master be arrested and tortured and killed, and they think that they're going to be next. And so then all of a sudden, Jesus appears right in front of them and they are freaked out. The text emphasizes with multiple details that they were startled. They were frightened. Jesus immediately knows how they're feeling. He says that they are troubled. They're full of doubts. So in this state of fear and anxiety, what's the first thing that Jesus does to try to comfort them? He shows them his scars. Verse thirty nine, see my hands and feet. Verse forty. He showed them his hands and feet. Now when I read this, and I think about it, the very fact that Jesus has scars was kind of surprising to me. Think about it. Jesus. He's resurrected. It's not that he's just recovered. It's not that he's feeling a little better now. He's risen from the dead. This is his resurrection body that will be glorified for all of eternity. His perfected body that he is going to take with him as he ascends into heaven. And yet he still has scars. And it's not like after a few years of being in heaven, eventually the scars will be healed and get better. His scars are as eternal as his resurrected body is eternal. And we know that because we have seen the vision of the Apostle John in his revelation, the vision of heaven that God gives for us to see. And in that vision, John sees Jesus in all of his eternal glory. And how does he describe him? The lamb who was slain? Jesus for all of eternity is identified by his suffering. His scars are an eternal testimony to his glory. Now, a lot of times we as Christians, we try to push away our suffering. We try to minimize it and forget about it and hide it. We say to ourselves something like, don't worry about your suffering now. When you die, you go to heaven. You'll be able to completely forget about all the pain and you'll be compared to the eternal glory. You just won't even realize all the suffering anymore. Well nice idea, but from what we see of Jesus's resurrection, that's just not accurate. We will never forget our suffering. But our suffering will be transformed. Our scars will be like an eternal testimony of glory. Our scars will be declaring the work of God in our lives. And that work of God, particularly in the work of missions. It's not accomplished despite our suffering, but actually it's accomplished through our suffering. Now, I used to live in the Middle East, not in Iran itself, but one of the neighboring countries of Iran. And when I was living there, I had a good friend who was an Iranian Christian. I'm not going to tell you his real name, but I'll call him Ross. Ross was connected to the whole group of house church, house churches in Iran, and so he would be the one because of his connection with the underground house churches, he would invite Christians out of Iran to come to where we were living in the neighboring country, where I could teach them the Bible and ministry and theology. Um, and so Ross did a great job. He was one of the unique Iranians who was very gifted in organizational skills. Now, Ross had been living in the United States for decades and he'd become a US citizen. But he was also an Iranian citizen as well. And so and he still had a lot of relatives in Iran. And so there was one time when he went back from this neighboring country where we were living back into Iran to see, just to see his relatives. It wasn't a ministry trip. He wouldn't want to do any work there. He just wanted to

see his family. And so he brought a bunch of Skechers shoes filled. He filled up a suitcase with Skechers shoes to give as gifts to all of his relatives. But as soon as he arrived in the airport, he was detained. And he had he had he was brought before a special government office for interrogation. This high government official came to question him. And the man's title, um, it was something like the director for stopping the Christian Church in Iran is literally he's the head of persecution. Ross described him as the Iranian Saul of Tarsus, the man who would go around city to city looking for Christians to persecute. And he was very fervent to explicitly stop the growth of the church in Iran. And so they searched all through Ross's belongings, his luggage, and by God's incredible providence, Ross had just bought a new laptop and so had no information on it. And for some reason, while he was on the plane coming over, he described this to me later that he had this some sort of conviction that he should take his phone and delete all the contacts on his phone, so he the phone had no information either. And so they were suspicious of his suitcase full of Sketchers. They thought maybe there were some, like micro SD memory cards that were full of Farsi Bibles or something. They were stuffed in the soles of the shoes. But he said, no, no, no, they're just really comfortable shoes. And then there was the interrogation for ten hours. This director in charge of the persecution of the church held Ross in the interrogation room and grilled him about his Christian activities in Iran. But instead of asking him questions of what he was doing, the man just went on and on complaining about his own problems, complaining that as much as he tried to stop the Christian church, it just wasn't stopping. In fact, it was growing. And he just went on complaining more and more about the fact that the Christian church was in fact, exploding in growth faster and faster. So he described all the things that he did. He described the wiretaps, he described the intimidation tactics. He described the different Christian leaders that they were following, described the surveillance by the government agents. He went on into even specific tactics that he used for specific cities. For eight hours he went on this rant complaining that nothing he did worked to stop the growth of the church. Instead, the church kept growing and growing. Finally, after this eight hour rant for the last two hours, the man gave Ross a turn to talk. And can you imagine what Ross would say at that moment, being interrogated by the director in charge of persecution. This man visibly frustrated, visibly angry at the church. Finally, after eight hours of this complaint, what do you think Ross would say? Ross gave his testimony. He thought, what a perfect opportunity to share the gospel with this man. Ross wasn't concerned about protecting himself or guarding his freedom. He saw it as the golden opportunity to share the gospel with this man. He talked about the impact that Jesus had on his own life, and he shared about how much Jesus means to him. He offered to pray for this man and asked for specific prayer requests, and he prayed for him. He had the real sense that this man, even as Saul of Tarsus, was going to become a Paul one day, he was going to become a great evangelist in Iran. Now, after the interrogation was over, they couldn't find any connection with Ross in this network of underground house churches. And so they let him go. He returned to the neighboring country where I was living, and he was able to tell me this whole story. Got to meet up with him and he told me how, as he was recounting all these events to me, he said he wasn't scared. He wasn't worried at all. In fact, he was so thankful for the experience. He was thankful that he could get an inside view of the specific strategies that the government was using to persecute the church, that he had the opportunity to be arrested

to listen in on all that the government was trying to do to stop the church. What a great opportunity. It was just so thankful that he could be arrested for the sake of the Kingdom. Despite the suffering and the risk, Ross thought it was a strategic value for what they gained. And time and time again, Christians will suffer for their witness of Christ. But their suffering is not just their own, it belongs to Christ. They're suffering because Christ suffered. And so Jesus takes that suffering and he uses it strategically for his glory and for the building of his kingdom. Now, so if we understand our first point now Jesus's testimony of suffering, let's turn to our second point. History's testimony of suffering. After Jesus reassures and comforts the disciples by showing them his hands and showing him his feet, pointing to his own suffering, then he points to all of history that his suffering has actually fulfilled. He says that all the law of the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms, basically the entire Old Testament was fulfilled not just by Christ, but specifically by the suffering of Christ. Now, we don't have time here to go into all to demonstrate how all the Old Testament points to the cross of Christ. But one implication that we can learn from this is that if all of the history of the redemption of the whole Old Testament points to the suffering of Christ, then God must have been in control of all of those events in history in order to make it point to Christ. God was in control of the martyrdom of Abel. He was in control of the ridicule of Noah. He was in control of the imprisonment of Joseph. He was in control of the persecution of Daniel. God was in control of all of those moments of suffering. Not that he caused the suffering, not that he was the author of all that evil, but that he used it to point to the suffering of Christ. Now we can be sure that if all the history in biblical times was under God's control to point to the suffering of Christ, then all the history today is still under God's control, and it is fulfilled by the suffering of Christ. Now one example we see of this is the history that is currently in the making right now of God's control over the events in Iran. On December twenty eighth, just a couple months ago, a large group of business owners from Tehran gathered to protest the economic downturn in Iran. The main complaint of the protesters was the rapid downturn in the value of the Iranian currency, the rial. Now, practically overnight, the Iranian rial dropped to one hundredth of its original value. People were losing entire life savings overnight. Soon, the protests of business owners spread to the universities, and then they spread to other cities outside of Tehran. Then they spread to smaller towns and rural areas within a very short time. The protests. The situation quickly escalated out of control. In the first week, there were reports of individual fatalities and hundreds of arrests. In the second week, dozens of deaths and thousands of arrests. By the third week, there were reports of thousands of people killed among the protesters. By the time the government finally got control and suppressed the protests, news agencies have reported the number of deaths reaching as high as fifty thousand. Now what all this social unrest demonstrates is how completely dissatisfied the Iranian people are with the Islamic government of Iran. And all that dissatisfaction has led to the increase in Iranians coming to Christ. Christian ministries have reported that during previous years, when there were similar large protests like this, they have seen large spikes of interest and even greater numbers of people coming to Christ in those periods of social unrest.

Now, it was forty seven years ago that the Islamic revolution began in Iran, when this new government promised that Islam would restore the dignity and prosperity and freedom for its people. But through the decades, the Iranian people have seen unemployment rise, the

economy fall, they've seen the supposedly religious leaders ruling the country with unrelenting oppression and corruption. And as the years went on, the Iranian people became more and more discontent, even hateful of the Islamic government, and that has caused them to be discontent, even hateful of Islam itself. And as a vast majority of Iranians have turned their hearts away from Islam, many of them are turning to Christ. Some estimates that there are at least a few million believers inside of Iran today, and the rate of growth of Christianity inside of Iran is so high that Iran is considered now the fastest growing Christian population in the world. Now, just as God has used suffering of his people in all the redemptive history, in the Old Testament, God is also using the suffering in Iran and all over the world to draw people to Christ. This is the movement of the history that God is engineering to build the kingdom to the ends of the earth.

So what I want you to consider is how can you be a part of this movement? God is using suffering to create these movements of history, to draw countless souls into the into the kingdom. And how can you be a part of it? And to understand that, let's turn to our next point. So far, we've talked about Jesus's testimony of suffering and history's testimony of suffering. Now let's talk about your testimony of suffering. Now, after Jesus just pointed to his own scars as a testimony of suffering, and after he explains all of history, that it serves as a testimony to also to his suffering. Finally, he says to his disciples that they will also have a testimony. He says to them, you are witnesses. And that goes for you as well. Jesus is talking to each one of you. You are also his witnesses. And he says, just as with Jesus's testimony, history is testimony. Your testimony for Jesus may also involve suffering. Now that relationship between your testimony and suffering, it may not be so explicit in this passage, but there are certainly other parts of the Bible that talk about it. In particular, let me look at revelation chapter twelve, verses ten through eleven. It says, and I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, now the salvation and the power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God, and they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb, and by the word of their testimony. For they loved not their lives, even unto death. The Apostle John received this incredible vision of this epic battle between God and Satan. And what is the thing that ultimately defeats Satan? The blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony? It's suffering. Of course, the suffering of Christ is unique. Jesus is suffering on the cross is ultimate. It is sufficient to defeat Satan all by himself. But while Christ's suffering is ultimate and eternally sufficient, it does not stand alone. We have this great honor, this great privilege of contributing our own testimony and our own suffering as well. Our testimony is specifically described as a testimony that we will be willing to suffer for, even to the point of death. Now the voice from heaven, it declares, it declares, for they love not their lives, even unto death. Now that is where missions comes into all of this. For the vast majority of us in this room, honestly, we will never be faced with the threat of losing our lives as a witness to Christ. But there are millions upon millions of Christians all over the world who are daily suffering simply because they bear testimony to Jesus because of their witness. And so our work of missions is to choose to suffer alongside with them. Now, none of us can choose whether or not we suffer. Suffering comes along. The longer you live, the more you experience suffering. That's just a fact of life. And even though we don't have a choice of whether or not we suffer, all of us have a choice of whether or

not we use our suffering as a testimony to Christ for our brothers and sisters in Iran, in Pakistan, in China, in India and North Korea and Sudan and countless other parts of the world. They don't have a choice but to suffer for their testimony. But for us, we can choose to suffer alongside our brothers and sisters through the work of missions. So how do you do that? I have three suggestions for you. First, you can pray for missions. Pray for the persecuted church. Pray for missionaries in the national Christians in those countries. And you may. I mean, you may naturally be thinking, well, I know, I know, I should pray. But praying is hard and I'm just so busy and I get too distracted and I'm just. I'm just not good at prayer. And yes, all of that is true. That's true of me as well. And that is why it is suffering. Be willing to suffer in prayer. In fact, be willing to suffer. Choose to suffer. To stand alongside of our brothers and sisters who do not have that choice. In fact, Briarwood even has a special persecuted prayer team. If you look in these beautiful booklets on page thirty one, you can see the whole list of topics and times and meetings for the Persecuted Church Prayer team. I'd encourage you as one practical application. One concrete step that you can take from this conference is sign up for this persecuted church prayer team that we can choose to suffer alongside our brothers and sisters. Now, second, after we you can pray for missions. You can also give to missions and praise God. We are able even to gather in this room tonight because Briarwood gives to missions. Praise God for that in an incredible way. We have already seen how much you have given to missions, and I praise God for each and every one of you. We have, uh, but the challenge of missions is to have a testimony that does not shrink even unto death. To stand with the brotherhood of the persecuted church around the world is to suffer as they suffer. And so can you imagine what we could possibly accomplish for the sake of missions if we gave, and keep giving and keep giving until what point? Until it hurts that we can choose to suffer alongside of our brothers and sisters who don't have that choice? Now we can pray to for missions we can give to missions. We can also engage in missions, whether it's going on short term trips or going long term, or serving among refugees or immigrants right here in the city of Birmingham, engage in missions in whatever way. And yes, it's inconvenient. It may even be uncomfortable. But no matter what type of suffering you and I may face in order to engage in missions, that suffering is always voluntary. We can always step back and go back to the comfort of our homes. But would you choose to suffer for the sake of your brothers and sisters who do not have that choice to suffer? Now, as we close tonight, let me share one more story. In the beginning, I shared about the Iranian pastor that I had met all the way back in nineteen ninety three. The one who was killed for his faith, Pastor Haik. His full name is Pastor Haik Hovsepian. Well, Pastor Haik suffering became a testimony that inspired the entire country and others in Iran to follow Christ and to serve him. Ever since that moment over thirty years ago, my heart has been set on serving Iranians. So I finished college. After that trip, I finished college, I went to seminary. I served as a pastor in California. Then my family and I moved overseas and began serving Iranians. I lived in Europe, where I pastored an Iranian church. I lived in the Middle East, where I provided a training and teaching to Iranian underground house church leaders. And even now I serve as a full time professor at Covenant Theological Seminary. But I'm still engaged with the work of missions to Iranians and training Iranian church leaders. Now, a few years ago, I took a trip to the Middle East to teach for a group teach at Iranian Bible Conference. Again, not in Iran itself, but in one of the neighboring countries. So

a group of underground house church leaders had come out of Iran and met us in that neighboring country. And for one week, I had the real privilege, the honor of teaching them from the Bible and teaching them theology. I had such an amazing time. What an honor it is in every occasion to teach these dear brothers and sisters who are serving at such great risk and persecution in the underground church in Iran. Now for the conference. They had brought this special worship leader to lead the times of praise and singing, and I couldn't believe it when I saw who it was. His name is Gilbert Hovsepian. He is famous praise leader and Christian music artist among Iranian Christians, and he is also the son of Pastor Hovsepian, the very man that I had met six months before he was martyred in Iran back in nineteen ninety three. Now at the conference, Gilbert did an amazing job of leading us in worship, and I was so blessed by the singing and the time of prayer. Near the end of the conference, I asked if I could just have some time to sit and talk with him, and I shared with him that story of how I had met his father all those years ago. Gilbert also shared how difficult it was for him as a young boy to lose his father at that time. After Pastor Haik was killed, Gilbert's mother and his siblings, they had to flee Iran, and they sought asylum and settled in Southern California. But for years, he carried this bitterness in his heart against the people who had killed his father. That bitterness were like scars on his heart. But eventually he was able to forgive them and truly forgive them, so that finally those scars could heal. And instead of being a source of pain, they became a testimony of glory. And so now they're a source of glory, a testimony that he shares with the world, even as he gives praise, concerts and worship sessions. And he shares his testimony among Iranians and Christians of all nations around the world. And so many people have been blessed to hear his story and to sing his music all over the world. The scars of pastor Hovsepian's suffering and death from over thirty years ago continue to serve as a testimony of God's glory. And now the scars of his son, Gilbert Hovsepian his suffering have also turned into a glorious testimony to God. Now, are you ready to add your testimony as well? Now, maybe some of you are here tonight and you have your own scars, and they feel like a wound on your heart. If that's you, I want you to realize Jesus is right here, right now, right before you. And he says to you, see my hands, see my feet. Realize that for all of your scars of suffering, you can lift your eyes in faith to the cross. Jesus will turn all your scars into a testimony of glory to be used for his mission.

*Let's pray together.*

*Heavenly father, we thank you so much for your glory, for your greatness, your perfection, your victory. Lord, we are just humble servants. We are just weak and faulty human beings. So many times we stumble, we fall. So many times we hurt and are in pain. Heavenly father, I pray for every brother and sister in this room. You know our pain. You know our experiences. You know the scars on our hearts. Lord, I do pray you would transform them into glory. Lord, for each one of us lift up our eyes to the cross, Lord, to see what Jesus has done for us, that we can add our testimony to this great chorus of witnesses. Lord, that we can see your mission going to the ends of the earth, people drawn from all nations, tongues and tribes, lifting up praise to Jesus as a testimony to your glory. Lord, in Jesus name we pray. Amen.*