

Hebrews Chapter 13

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[0 : 00] Please, would you open your Bibles back to Hebrews and chapter 13, and that's where we're going to look together.

It's what the Bible has to teach us and instruct us concerning our attitude, our relationship with those who are persecuted for their faith, many of them the other side of the world, many of them that we will never meet.

There has, of course, been one person who in recent months and years has become a core celeb, if I can put it that way, for Christians who are suffering persecution.

That is a woman by the name of Asia Bibi. So well known is Asia that she's got her own Wikipedia page.

That's how her news, her story has spread through even the non-Christian media and world. Just if you're unaware of Asia's story, let me just give you a little backup, a little brief history.

[1 : 09] She was a farm laborer living in rural Pakistan, married with two daughters. One day in November 2009, it's a long way back, she was working in a field along with a group of Muslim laborers, workers as well, and she took a drink from a well.

These Muslim women attacked her because she was drinking from a well that they drank from, and in the altercation, in the argument that ensued, they accused Asia of blasphemy, of speaking against their prophet, Muhammad.

Police were involved, she was arrested, she was taken before a court of law, she was found guilty of blasphemy, for which the sentence is death by hanging.

And so for the last eight years, and more than that, Asia has been on death row in prison in Pakistan. Only in the last few weeks have we learned that the sentence of death has been dropped, which has caused all sorts of riots and uproar in parts of Pakistan.

But as of yet, we know that she's not totally free. So, she has become the most high-profile case, as it were. But she's just one amongst many thousands upon thousands of Christians who are regularly imprisoned around the world.

[2 : 43] And that has been particularly the case in the 20th century, in the 21st century, but it's nothing new. Christians throughout history and time have been persecuted throughout the whole church age.

Some of them very well-known people to us, like John Bunyan, the writer of Pilgrim's Progress.

Twelve years he was in prison, in Bedford Prison, here in the UK.

In other parts of the world and other countries, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a very famous name during the Second World War, was arrested, imprisoned, and ultimately executed by Nazi Germany.

And more recently, in the communist Romania, Richard Wernbrandt was in prison for many, many years, a pastor. And there could be countless others that we could think of throughout time in history.

But, of course, when we get to the New Testament, we read our Bibles, we find that, of course, this is the case there, too. The Apostle Paul, particularly, was often in and out of prison.

[3 : 47] He was a real lag in that sense. And many of his letters were written from those places. We know that Peter was imprisoned himself by Herod back in the book of Acts.

And he and John were beaten and persecuted. And we even know here, from the end of Hebrews chapter 13, that Timothy, that very close associate of Paul, was himself in prison.

And, in fact, the wonderful good news that the writer of Hebrews, probably was Paul, tells the believers is Timothy's been set free. He's been released from prison.

Wonderful good news in the midst of painful and difficult news. So it shouldn't surprise us that when we read the New Testament, and particularly here in chapter 13, we have instructions about

remembering those who are in prison for their faith.

There it is in verse 3. Continue to remember. In other words, don't stop remembering. Never forget those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering.

[4 : 56] And this is an instruction, a command, isn't it, from God's Word, that we must continually remember those in prison. But it raises two very important questions, I think, for us.

First of all, why? Why should we remember them in prison in other parts of the world, those who are suffering for their faith? And secondly, how? How should we remember them?

Just think about them? What should we do? Is it something more practical than that? And, of course, again, we recognize that when the writer here says, continue to remember those in prison, he means believers.

He doesn't mean all the criminals, if I can put it that way, all those in prison. We know there's good work being done in our prisons in the UK, reaching prisoners with the gospel. Yes, we should pray for them and look to that work.

But here he's specifically talking about those who, simply because of their faith in Christ, simply because they love Jesus, have been arrested, imprisoned, and are being ill-treated and suffering.

[5 : 56] And so it is continuing even to our day in many, many parts of this world. So I want us to think about these two questions, these two simple questions.

How, or why? First of all, why should we remember those in prison? Well, first of all, of course, we should do so because we're commanded to. There's a command here to remember them in prison, but also it's part of that larger command, that all-embracing command, which we see at the very start of the chapter, keep on loving one another.

Keep on loving one another. The command is found through the whole Bible. The Bible is full of the command to love one another. When we go back to Moses and the laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus and so on, they are all about how do we work out what it is to love our neighbor as ourself. How we should relate to one another, care for one another, support one another, not steal from one another, not lie against one another. They all are the outworking of the command to love. In fact, Paul says, the greatest command is love.

But of course, Jesus himself gave a new commandment, didn't he, to his disciples when he was gathered with them. In John chapter 15 and verse 12, he tells them, love one another as I have loved you.

[7 : 17] So if we're not sure what love is like, then we can be pretty certain we know what it's like when we look at the Lord Jesus. His love for us is sacrificial and costly. His love has no limit.

His love is a love which is everlasting. Love one another as I have loved you. And so really what the writer Hebrews is saying is, keep on loving one another.

And one of the ways you do that is you continue to remember those in prison. And in fact, all the way through the New Testament, again and again, in every single letter, we have the call, the command, the instruction, the encouragement to love one another.

Love is the key. Love is the key to any relationship. Love is the key to our Christian relationship, our church relationships. Love is to rule over all that we do and all that we say and all that we think.

In fact, of course, when we get to the first letter of John, which is again a letter of love, and we're hoping to study this letter in our midweek Bible studies in the new year, the writer John, who's often known as the apostle of love, stresses that it is only by love for one another, that we have concrete evidence that we are believers, that we are born of God, that we are Christians, and that to not have love for one another in the church family, for Christians, is evidence that we have not known God.

[8 : 48] Here's what he says in chapter 4. Dear friends, verse 7, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love. And then over in the same chapter, verse 19, we love because he first loved us.

Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister whom they've seen cannot love God whom they've not seen.

And he has given us this command. Anyone who loves God must love their brother and sister. So again, one of the evidences, the concrete proof, if you want to say, am I a Christian or not? Have I come to faith in the Lord Jesus or not? Has he done a work in my heart? It will be a work of love which is manifest in our relationship to one another. Now that's serious, isn't it?

[9 : 48] That's a challenge to us. And when we come to Hebrews, in chapter 13, we realize that challenge does not only impact upon our local church life, but it impacts upon our relationship to every Christian believer beyond our local church and throughout the world, and particularly, I would stress this morning, those who are persecuted.

Now why should we love one another? Well, again, here's the answer, isn't it? Why should we keep this command? Well, we've already seen it's a command and we must keep it, but there's something more than that.

There's a very real reason why we love one another. It's there in verse 1. Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters because we are part of one family.

We belong together. We're united together. We share the same heavenly Father to whom we pray and to whom we call upon. We enjoy the same salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have the same Savior as every other believer around the world. We have the Lord Jesus Christ. We're told as our elder brother to every single one of us.

[10 : 57] We are spiritually, we are eternally united together in one body. And that includes all those who are in prison and those who are suffering and those who are treated for their faith.

Now, we all love singing of heaven. We sang about it there. We think about it when we read through Revelation in the first few chapters, chapters 4 and 5, of this wonderful picture of every believer in heaven singing the praises of God all united with one song and one voice.

But, dear friends, that's the end goal. That's the sure hope that we have. Dear friends, we are living out and meant to live that out on earth today.

We're meant to live that out in the way we relate to one another. Do you really want to spend all of eternity, and it's a very long time, with all the people in this room?

What about all the people who are Christians outside of this room? We'll be rubbing shoulders together. We'll be one together.

[12 : 06] We'll be loving one another with perfection. There will not be no sin to spoil, but we're to do that now. We're to work at that now. That's to be our goal now.

The taste of heaven on earth. That's what the church is. That's what it's meant to be. That's how it's meant to operate. That's what it's meant to be like. We're meant to be, dear friends, those sort of people, as Jesus said, that the world will stand up and take notice because we love one another. They'll see that you're my disciples, Jesus said. And that means loving those who we do not see, who we do not know, but are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are part of one family, united. Because being a Christian is, as we know, being joined to the Lord Jesus Christ, becoming united with him, us in him, and he in us.

This spiritual bond, which can never be broken. But if I am united to Christ, and you're united to Christ, then we're united to one another as well, aren't we? We're part of that vine, as Jesus used the illustration in John 15.

[13 : 11] We're all branches of it. And so we find that again and again, in the writings of the New Testament, God's people are urged to express that love in a very practical way, as brothers and sisters.

Romans 12, 15, the Apostle Paul writes there, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Why should we do that? Simply because we have sympathy for them?

Simply because our emotions are stirred? No, because they are one with us. If they are blessed, if I can put it that way, then they will be blessing for us. If they suffer, then we share in their suffering. Such is the unity, such is the bond between the believer with one another. Brothers and sisters in Christ. So why?

Because the command is, love one another. And we long, as Christian believers, to keep the command of Christ, to do his will. And we know his primary will is that we should love one another.

[14 : 09] Secondly, we are part of the family. We belong together. We may not all look the same. We may not all sound the same. We may not all have the same likes and tastes, but we are one in a much more real and deeper way than anything else that divides us.

And therefore, we are to love one another. So that's why. So we can't wriggle off that, can we?

None of us can say, I don't need to remember my brothers and sisters in Christ in prison.

I don't need to do this. All of us, I hope, grasp we must because we are Christian and it is what we are about. But there's other reasons too.

Other reasons which benefit us when we remember those who are imprisoned. First of all, I believe that when we remember those who are imprisoned and ill-treated and suffering, it actually leads us to a greater sense of contentment and thankfulness for all that we have.

That seems to be the sense. If you follow through the argument that Paul has here, he talks about verse 5, keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have.

[15:20] There's a link there, isn't there? Contentment comes from not loving or desiring or wanting money, but it's actually, there's a contentment as we realise that we have so much that God has given us and blessed us with.

Think about how Paul, I'm going to call him Paul for now. Paul of Hebrews puts this, continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Put yourself in their shoes, that's what he's saying, isn't it? Think how you would feel if like that family of Noah, you'd have to flee your home for your life and everything that you could carry was just about what you could take but not even, couldn't even take his own marbles, the poor lad, with him to play with.

And for months and for months you were separated from your home and then eventually you went back and you went back to your home and it had been burnt down and everything you owned had been destroyed.

Just think of that for a moment. How would I feel about that? Now doesn't it make you realise that when you go home and I go home, our homes haven't been burnt out.

[16:39] We don't have to flee for our lives. We don't have to live in a tent for months and months. Doesn't that make a sense? Thank you Lord for what I have. Isn't that the problem for so many people?

It's always about if only what I don't have that matters. I don't have the 90 inch screen TV and I don't have the latest model of car and I don't have the latest iPhone 10X or whatever it is and I don't have.

But when we realise that our brothers and sisters in Christ have nothing, then it makes us realise just how much we have. Lord, thank you.

I've got so much. I've got a bed that's not been burnt with fire and I've got a home and a house to live in and I've got all these things. It should make us be grateful.

It puts our woes into perspective, doesn't it? My little problems, my little difficulties, my little hang-ups. It makes us appreciate the freedom we have and the comforts we have.

[17:45] I'm just going to read a little bit from Barnabas Fund. This is quoted, this is a lady speaking. I wrapped my baby on my back and carried one of the twins in each arm.

We were all so scared. We ran together with other villagers. We could see the Burmese airstrikes from a distance destroying our homes and our village, said Mary.

She and her children are some of the 10,000 Kachin Christians displaced by a wave of attacks by the Myanmar military earlier this year.

Have we had to do that? I haven't. Makes us appreciate what we have and what God has done for us. Makes us thankful there's a good reason.

But also I think as well, and it comes out here a little bit in Hebrews and this time in verse 13, I believe that when we see and recognize and remember that our dear brothers and sisters in Christ are persecuted for their faith, it emboldens us, it emboldens us to be faithful in our evangelism, in our standing up for Jesus.

[19:00] Notice what the writer of Hebrews, he's talking about Jesus suffering outside of the city. Now we know there's a story, don't we? Our Lord Jesus carried his cross out to Golgotha, a small hill outside of the city.

And what he's saying in one sense, Jesus was cast out, he was exiled, he was ostracized, he was put outside the holy city of Jerusalem when he suffered and died.

And he's saying to us, well therefore let us suffer with him, let's get outside the comfort zone of Jerusalem, let's be willing to bear the disgrace of being a Christian.

Because that's what it is for many of our friends, our brothers and sisters. Sometimes even for us to be a Christian means that people think poorly of us and badly of us and judge us and it's bearing the name of Christ.

It's one of the worst things you can be, I think, in, well certainly in many of these countries but it's coming perhaps to our own country, the worst thing you can be is to be a Christian. None of us have been arrested, have we, for saying I'm a Christian to somebody or talking about church to somebody.

[20 : 17] None of us have been beaten up, I don't think, because we have sought to tell people of Jesus. None of us have been put in prison for preaching or witnessing. We're not likely to be.

Not likely to have our possessions taken from us and driven out of our homes as that family in Pakistan were that I mentioned because we have simply shared Jesus.

That's what happens to other believers. Here's somewhere else that we may not think about.

Security police in Tajikistan, that's one of the central Asian countries.

Security police in Tajikistan arrested and fined ten Christians in August for handing out gospel literature. The group had gone to the Pamir Mountains to give out tracts.

They were fined more than most Tajiks would earn in six months about 750 pound. Then in neighbouring Kazakhstan, a new religious survey found that in 2017, 263 people were punished for hosting religious meetings, offering religious literature and other offences.

[21 : 27] The authorities prosecuted 30 Christians, mostly Protestants, for sharing their beliefs.

None of those things are going to happen to you and I when we give out a tract to somebody or invite somebody to a carol service or talk to somebody about what we mean by a Christian and share our faith with them.

But they are. So that should embolden us, that should encourage us. I'm not going to have to suffer that. I'm not going to have to go to court, I'm not going to have to be put in prison. What's the worst that people can do to me?

They can poo-poo me. They can say, well, I don't have to rubbish. Put me down. That's all they can do. They can't do anything. They won't do anything. It emboldens us.

It causes us, as the writer says here, to go bearing the disgrace Jesus bore. I'm willing to stand with these folk and say, I am a Christian and Jesus died for me.

So that's some of the reasons why we should remember. There are reasons because it's something which we are commanded. It's an expression of what it means to be a true Christian. But also there are great blessings for us by remembering and praying for and thinking of those who suffer for their faith.

[22 : 42] But how do we do that then? How do we love them? How do we remember them as we should? Just two very simple things and again, they come out here in Hebrews 13 too.

We're to remember them in practical ways and the most important it seems, the most pressing is to pray. To pray for them.

Notice how Paul, as he brings his letter to a close, verse 18, here, pray for us. I particularly urge that you pray, verse 19. The best and most pressing need for Christians who are suffering is that we pray for them.

Notice that, again, here, he doesn't write and say, please send us some money. He doesn't write, please send us some clothes or send us some food or pray that we'd be released from prison.

It may be that he, I don't think verse 19 is about him being in prison. I think it's simply about him wanting to visit the believers there and to get to see them again.

[23 : 50] But what does he pray for? Verse 18, really, in one sense, his prayer is, we're sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live an honourable way, honourably in every way. There's a sense of his prayer is, we want to live upright, godly lives in this ungodly generation.

we want our lives to shine for Christ. He doesn't pray for deliverance, doesn't pray for an end of suffering or ill treatment.

And it may surprise you, that's exactly what the Christians today, who are suffering, ask for. Open Doors wrote this in one of their prayer letters. Looking from the outside, we often want to pray for the trials of the persecuted church to cease.

We hear about the decisions parents are forced to make to protect their children or the prison sentences so many serve because of their beliefs. It's only normal and seemingly right that we would want to pray for the persecution to end.

Yet the reality is that believers in the persecuted church around the world often don't wish or pray for their trials to end. Instead, persecuted believers ask us to pray with them that they will stand strong and witness with faithfulness.

[25 : 07] Not surprising. What's the first thing that we do when things are difficult? Lord, get me out of this situation. Sort out this financial problem.

Give me a job because I've been very redundant. We are, how can I put it, I'm sorry to say and I conclude myself in this as well, we are so worldly minded that we only think of the here, the now and the practical and the material.

It seems to me that these believers who've been persecuted and suffered have learnt that the things of this world are passing, they're transitory, they're just for a moment, they're not the important matter. What matters is what is spiritual because that is everlasting.

And so their prayer is, don't let the trials end. One sense, they're not wishing for them to continue but their prayer is, Lord, help us to be faithful to you, to be strong, to keep on trusting you and to be that shining witness for you even to our jailers, our persecutors and those who will treat us.

And we're to pray like that. We're to pray for them. And so the challenge, again, I'd say to you and to myself is this, when and how often do we pray for the persecuted church or do we never, do we never, even in our prayers, in our quiet times, how often do we pray for those believers that we hear about, that we know about?

[26 : 33] And we say, well, I don't know about anybody. I never hear about these things. It's not on my radar. Then make it come on your radar. Read about it. Be informed.

Because ultimately, the second thing that we must do, surely, is this, we must help practically where we can. There's verse 16. Notice what it says.

Do not forget. In other words, continue to do this. Continue to remember to do good and to share with others for with such sacrifices God is pleased. Want to live a life that pleases God?

Yes, it's through faith in the Lord Jesus. Wonderfully so. But there are fruit from faith. There's a reality in faith that meets the road, as it were, that hits the tarmac and it's this.

We're to give and to share. Comes back again, doesn't it really? At the beginning of the chapter, verse 2, do not forget to show hospitality to strangers. For by doing so, some people have been hospitable to angels without knowing it.

[27 : 34] It's clearly fitted in with the whole considering and remembering prisoners as well. There is a giving, a sharing, a caring, even people we don't know but they are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Giving good things. Dear friends, it's been easier now in our day and generation than ever before to give to support those Christians who are suffering and persecuted.

I've already mentioned things like the Barnabas Fund, Open Doors, Release International, there's others as well that you may know of. There are just a few who will give what we give and share it and distribute it to those who are struggling and suffering and going through hardship.

Of course, the problem is that for many of us when we read these things, hear about these things, we say, well, anything I can give is just a drop in the ocean. It's not going to make any real difference, is it?

Yes, it is. Amazing difference just to one family, just to one person. Where was I reading? Just somewhere, where was it? It was on here, I think it was.

[28 : 44] Again, on Barnabas Fund. This is about something slightly different. It's about that terrible tsunami that took place in Indonesia just the other month. What's this? £4.20.

That's less than two cups of coffee, isn't it? Well, it depends where you get your coffee from. If you believe they advert on McDonald's then it's more than £4.20. But I have never penned that much.

But a couple of cups of coffee could enable an emergency church kitchen in Sulawesi, Indonesia, to provide three meals a day for a week for a Christian child made homeless by the earthquake.

Look at that. You can feed that child for a whole week with two cups of coffee or less, really, because they're about £2.50 a cup now. We can all do that.

We can all afford that. And more besides, can't we? But we've got to be motivated. We've got to want to. We've got to desire to. It's all the drops in the bucket make a full bucket, don't they?

And I'll just encourage you. Encourage you to find out. Don't take every newsletter. That can be overwhelming. If you get newsletters from every single Christian charity that supports that can be really overwhelming.

[29 : 58] You can feel bogged down and it can be heavy going. It can harden, sadden your heart. But just take one. Just one organisation. One Christian charity organisation that you know are doing good.

And just commit yourself. Maybe just a pound a week. Just a little bit. So that you can get to know what's going on. You can be informed.

You can pray for those. Paul writes here, put yourself in their shoes as if you were in prison. as if you were ill-treated and suffering. How would you feel about your children being able to be fed and not having to go hungry? What a difference that would make to you as a Christian.

Wouldn't that make you want to give thanks to God? Wouldn't that want to make you praise him for his faithfulness? A lot of littles make a huge amount. So I want us just now, just for a moment, in silent prayer, to respond to God's word.

[31 : 03] I'm not wanting you to do anything to me or say anything to me. I want you to, yourself, before the Lord, say, Lord, what is it you want me to do? Do you want me to commit myself to just praying once a week for the persecuted church?

Do you want me to commit giving? What do you want me to do? Let's just wait on the Lord and respond to him. Amen. Blessings that you have given us practically, materially.

And we're so grateful for the peace that we have in our land at this time that we can worship in this way without fear. But again, oh Lord, we thank you that you have allowed us these blessings, that we might share them, that we might stand, that we might pray, that we might be one with those who are brothers and sisters in Christ.

We pray that you would guide and lead us, Lord, as individuals and as a church as to how we can love one another as Christ loved us. Help us then and not to forget, but help us to continue to remember those who are in prison as if we were there ourselves.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.