ARISE AFRICA

GLOBAL INTEGRATED CAMPAIGN



2024 DEVOTIONAL

Devotional written by Open Doors' staff members to facilitate times of praying and fasting for the Church in sub-Saharan Africa.

All Bible quotations in this Devotional, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the NIV translation.

Acronyms:

ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MBB	Muslim-Background Believers
MENA	Middle East and North Africa (Field region)
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa

Arise Africa
Devotional

FOREWORD

Violence against Christian communities in sub-Saharan Africa is spiralling. The situation is complex and driven by multiple actors, including Islamic terrorist groups, radicalised Fulani herders and criminal gangs who profit from the high levels of insecurity in the affected countries.

As a result SSA was the region with the highest number of Christians killed for their faith globally in 2023, according to data from Open Doors World Watch Research (WWR).

The growing violence has uprooted whole communities, leaving some regions without the presence of a church. Of 34.5 million displaced people across SSA, WWR estimates around 16.2 million are Christians.

Amidst all this Christians feel abandoned and unprotected. What is more, during a conference in Lomé (Togo) last year, our brothers and sisters told us that they feel "alone and unheard" by the global Church. [1]

Their perception - and maybe at times the reality - that the wider Body of Christ is not there for and with them, adds to their distress. And this should spur us on.

Open Doors' founder, Brother Andrew wrote in his book "Battle for Africa" (1978), that a spiritual battle was raging on the continent and that this requires the "critical weapons [of] prayer, intercession, and the commitment of Christians all around the world".

We all have a role to play in this struggle, he said. "You can make a difference in Africa! Absurd as it sounds, it is nevertheless true. If the battle is a spiritual one, if the solutions are spiritual ones, then you, individually – right from where you live – can make a difference in the fate of Africa!"

So, let's take up the 'critical weapons' of prayer and intercession, and stand with our brothers and sisters in sub-Saharan Africa. So that they know they are not alone, and in the knowledge that, ultimately, the battle and the victory are not ours but the Lord's.

[1] Lomé Declaration on the Plight of Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa can be found on the opendoors.org Website.

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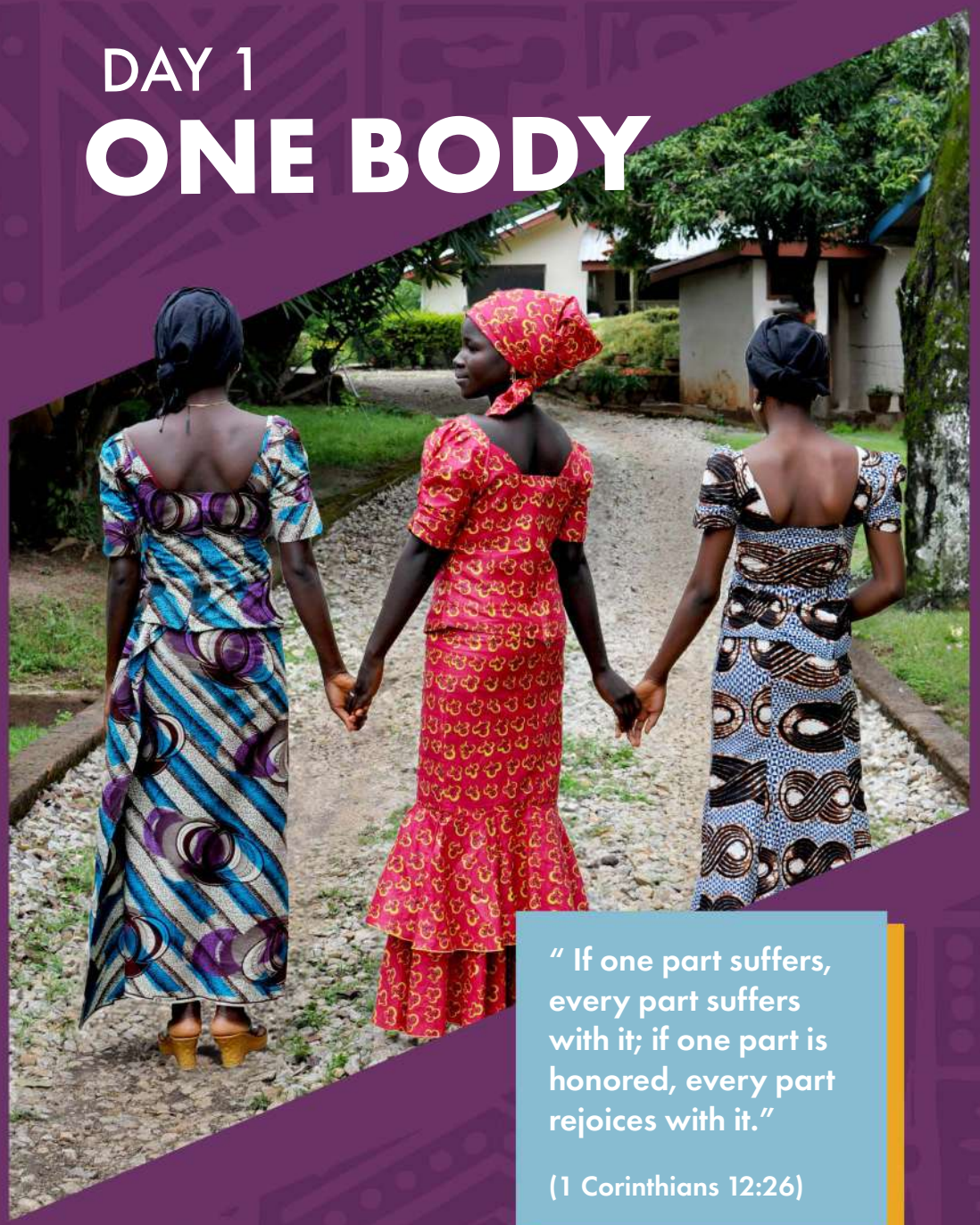
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DAY 1

ONE BODY



> " If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."
>
> (1 Corinthians 12:26)

We start our time of prayer and fasting for the Church in SSA with this very familiar verse. I believe our understanding of it can be enriched by connecting it to the preceding verse – *''so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other''.*

If there are no divisions among believers in Christ and we have equal concern for each other, we will come together under the direction of Jesus Christ to support and help members of the Body who suffer from persecution.

On the other hand, if there are divisions, they create so much distraction that we become deaf and blind to the direction from the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore fail in strengthening the suffering Church.

The Lord takes it personally when his followers are persecuted. We know this from His words to Saul when he was still a persecutor of those who belonged to the Way: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." (Acts 9:5). This tells us the actions of Saul were a direct attack on the very Body of Christ, of which He is the head.

> **"The need for support of our brothers and sisters in sub-Saharan Africa is far too important to be disrupted by division. The spiritual unity of the Church will vastly contribute to its success."**

We should understand that the Body of Christ is essentially spiritual. The strength and power in the Body of Christ is God's awesome spiritual power, described in Ephesians 1:19 as ''his incomparably great power for us who believe''.

What does this power of God do through his body?

First, his power should move us to consciously and regularly submit to Jesus Christ, the head of his body, whenever we come together to ask him to help us achieve our purpose of strengthening suffering Christians. We can start by one or two of us leading with a prayer of surrender and submission to our Lord and King as each of us submits to him. We must acknowledge Jesus as the head of his body, in order for us to receive from him his instructions, help and guidance. This inward spiritual posture of submission should be the reason we bow our head or go on our knees. God sees the heart that is surrendering to him.

Secondly, we must confess and repent of any division in the body caused by us or contributed to by us. Just like a small pebble dropped in a lake of water can create many ripples, so division can ripple spiritually and physically across the body of Christ to disrupt our prayers. The need for support of our brothers and sisters in SSA is far too important to be disrupted by division. The spiritual unity of the Church will vastly contribute to its success.

When we have unity between us, there is greater impact in the suffering body of Christ.

REFLECT

Are there situations where you have caused or contributed to division?

APPLY

As you begin your time of prayer, start with the steps outlined in the meditation: 1) Surrender and submit to Jesus, the King. 2) Confess and repent.

PRAY

The Church – The Church in SSA isn't always as united as it should be, even in the face of persecution. Pray:

- For unity and for awareness of the Persecuted Church in their own countries and those around them.

- That she will prepare herself to respond to the severe persecution in a biblical way, and for her to be *resilient, resourceful, and influential.*

The Global Church – to wake up to what is happening to brothers and sisters in SSA, and to stand with them so they no longer feel alone.

Open Doors – Our teams on the ground work with local partners. Pray for good collaboration and unity of vision and mind as they serve the Persecuted Church in numerous ways, including training, providing of Bibles and literature, distribution of relief aid, trauma care, etc

DAY 2

A NEED FOR LAMENTING



"Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope..." (Lamentations 3: 21 - 32)

Do you know what the World Watch List methodology [2] has as its starting point? The "brokenness of the world" (pp.8-9). That brokenness can crash unannounced into our lives, leaving us wondering how God could allow people and things to cause such pain. At such times the Bible encourages us to LAMENT, to shed our tears of anger and confusion into the palms of the Lord. Many of the Psalms show us examples of this - e.g. Psalm 13. But perhaps the need for lamenting is so great that God has given us a special little guide, a short five-chapter book of poetry.

The Old Testament book of Lamentations is written as a memorial of the 30-month siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian overlords in 587/586 BC. The poetry contains shocking pictures of slaughter, famine, cannibalism, rape, exile and destruction. The writer cannot believe his eyes. But in Chapter 3, God guides him to shut his eyes for a moment. In Lamentations 3:21, he writes: "This I call to mind". But what is THIS?

Despite all the pain, the writer calls to mind something about God he had almost forgotten. **Read Lamentations 3:21-32.**

"It's still dark, but the hymn-like cry of "Great is Thy Faithfulness" emerges as a sudden surge of hope-filled praise."

Interestingly, this 'calling to mind' is not placed at the end of the book to give a cheery ending. It's here, right in the middle. It's a central summit. It's a ray of light in the middle of darkness. Empty and helpless, the writer's mind turns to Scripture. He recalls how God's nature is always to be faithful to His promises. He calls to mind and knows in his heart that this is true for every new day, even though there are times – like right now! – when his eyes cannot see it. It's still dark, but the hymn-like cry of "Great is Thy Faithfulness" emerges as a sudden surge of hope-filled praise.

In the book of Lamentations, you could say that chapters 1 and 2 lead up to this pinnacle in chapter 3; and chapters 4 and 5 lead off back down into the valley again. Yes, the writer must open his eyes again and face the very real pictures of devastation around him – but there is something new in his heart - namely, the faith that knows deep down: "This is not God's last word on the matter." The lament has reached its goal.

Perhaps you remember Peter, James and John coming down the mountain after seeing the heavenly glory of Jesus Christ in the mountain-top Transfiguration (Matthew 17). They return from a vision of radiant, heavenly beauty to a broken world devastated by arguments, failure and screaming demons. But they return with treasure in their hearts. They know that these horrors are not God's last word. They have glimpsed eternal life; for a moment they have seen Jesus glorified, and that glimpse was later to be fuel for fearlessly spreading Gospel light into a dangerously dark world.

[2] This document can be found on the opendoors.org website.

REFLECT

What shapes your heart and mind and prayers when your world turns dark?

APPLY

Thank God for his faithfulness. That, in Him, his promises to us and the Church in SSA are "yes and amen".

PRAY

Extreme levels of violence – Violence is spiralling in many of the countries in SSA where Christians live. Pray:

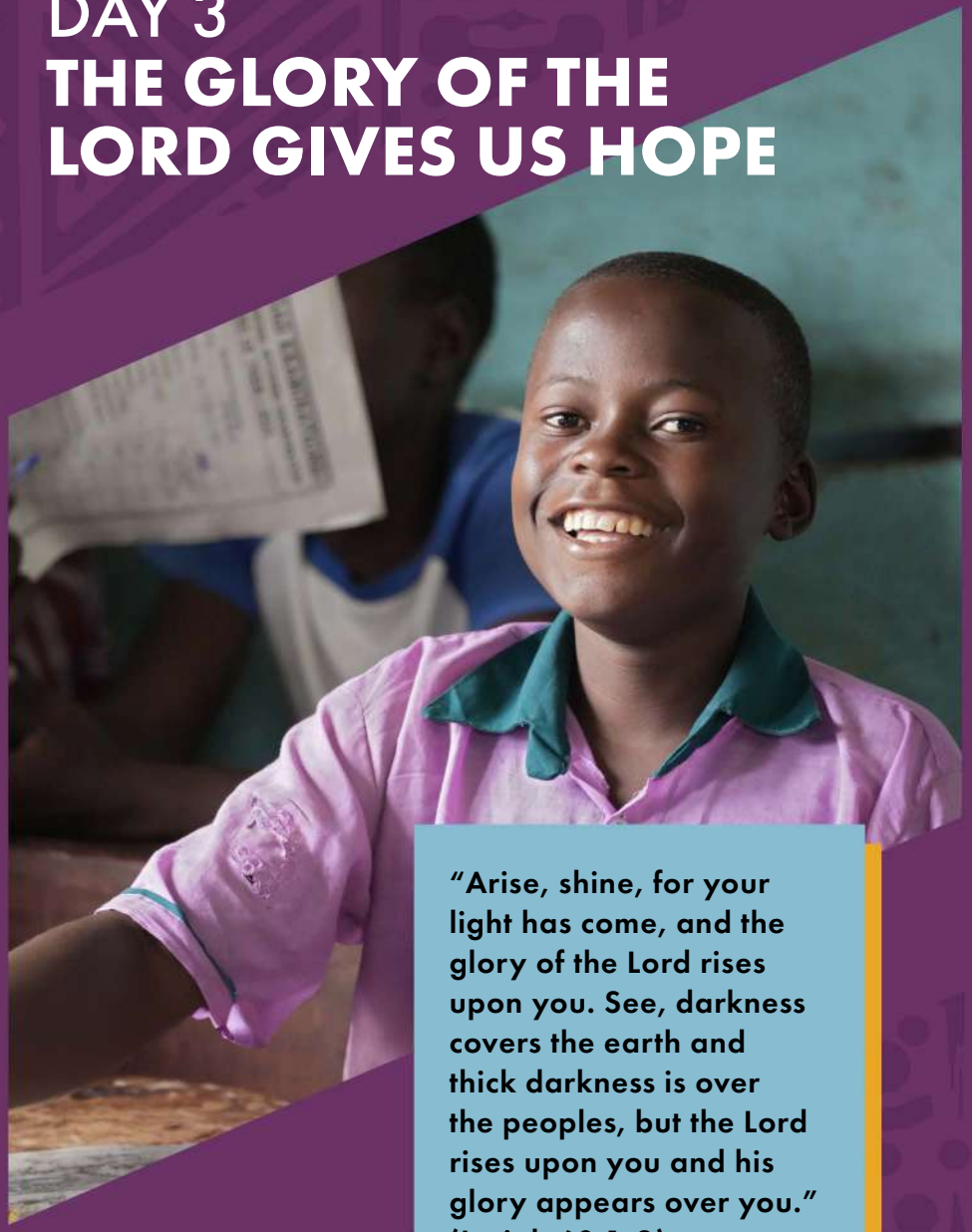
- For the resilience and growth of the Church in SSA. Pray urgently that Christians will hold on to Jesus, knowing the global Church has not forgotten them.
- That God will heal and comfort believers suffering trauma because of violent persecution.
- For wisdom and faith as Christians boldly seek to live lives that honour God, even amid growing persecution.

Open Doors –

The Arise Africa Campaign is calling for attention to the plight of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa who suffer extreme levels of violent persecution. Please pray for a further roll out of this Campaign this year. That the Lord will bless and use the initiative for His glory and for the strengthening of his Church.

Pray for our partners that work in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and DRC and who do a great deal of work amid increasingly difficult circumstances. May they not be overcome and hold fast to God who is 'compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness' (Psalm 103:8), especially in times when it feels like the wicked are winning.

DAY 3
THE GLORY OF THE LORD GIVES US HOPE



"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you." (Isaiah 60:1-2)

Read: Isaiah 60

As Open Doors we believe, are confident, and fully assured that – amidst the thick and dark clouds of violence, conflict, destruction, displacement, sorrow, and grief - the Glory of God has and will continue to rise all over Africa.

The evidence of this is the individual believer and combined witness of the Church. A Church that is worshipping, that is resilient and is committed to spreading the Good News everywhere while it is going through the fiercest trial of fire.

"But the more the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, the more they increased in number and the farther they spread through the land..." (Exodus 1:12, GNB).

We testify to and are grateful for the fruits we see despite oppression and violence.

"This is the hope... God's Glory that rises like the sun... and God's people reflecting it!"

We see a Church and believers who, again and again, arise from the ashes, shining and reflecting the Glory of the Lord. As one bereaved mother and wife who supports 24 other victims, said: "...my life, my strength, my trust and my hope is only in God...in Jesus Christ...I have no one else...!"

This is the living hope of a warrior (Psalm 71:14, ESV): "...but as for me I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more".

In John 11:4 we read Jesus' response to Mary and Martha when He received news of the death of Lazarus: "When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

This is the hope…God's Glory that rises like the sun…and God's people reflecting it! Habakkuk 2:14 (KJV): "For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea."

I am reminded of this song by Jonathan and Melissa Helser by Bethel Music - Raise a Hallelujah! -

"I raise a hallelujah in the presence of my enemies.

In the middle of the storm my praises roar, louder and louder!

I raise a hallelujah with everything in me!

Up from the ashes hope will arise!

Death is defeated, the King is alive and His glory shines!

Hallelujah!"

Let us arise on our knees and pray, and pray, and pray (three times) with the Church in Africa, with our brothers and sisters, that the Glory of God will rise and rise!

REFLECT

Think about, meditate on "The Glory of God". What does it mean to you? Is this where you find your 'hope'? What can you learn from our sister, the bereaved mother and wife quoted in today's devotion?

APPLY

Spend time praising God for who He is and all that He has done.

PRAY

Displaced Christians – One out of every three people who have been internally displaced globally because of violence and conflict, lives in SSA (source: IDMC).

Many have to flee multiple times because of increased insecurity in the places they found refuge initially.

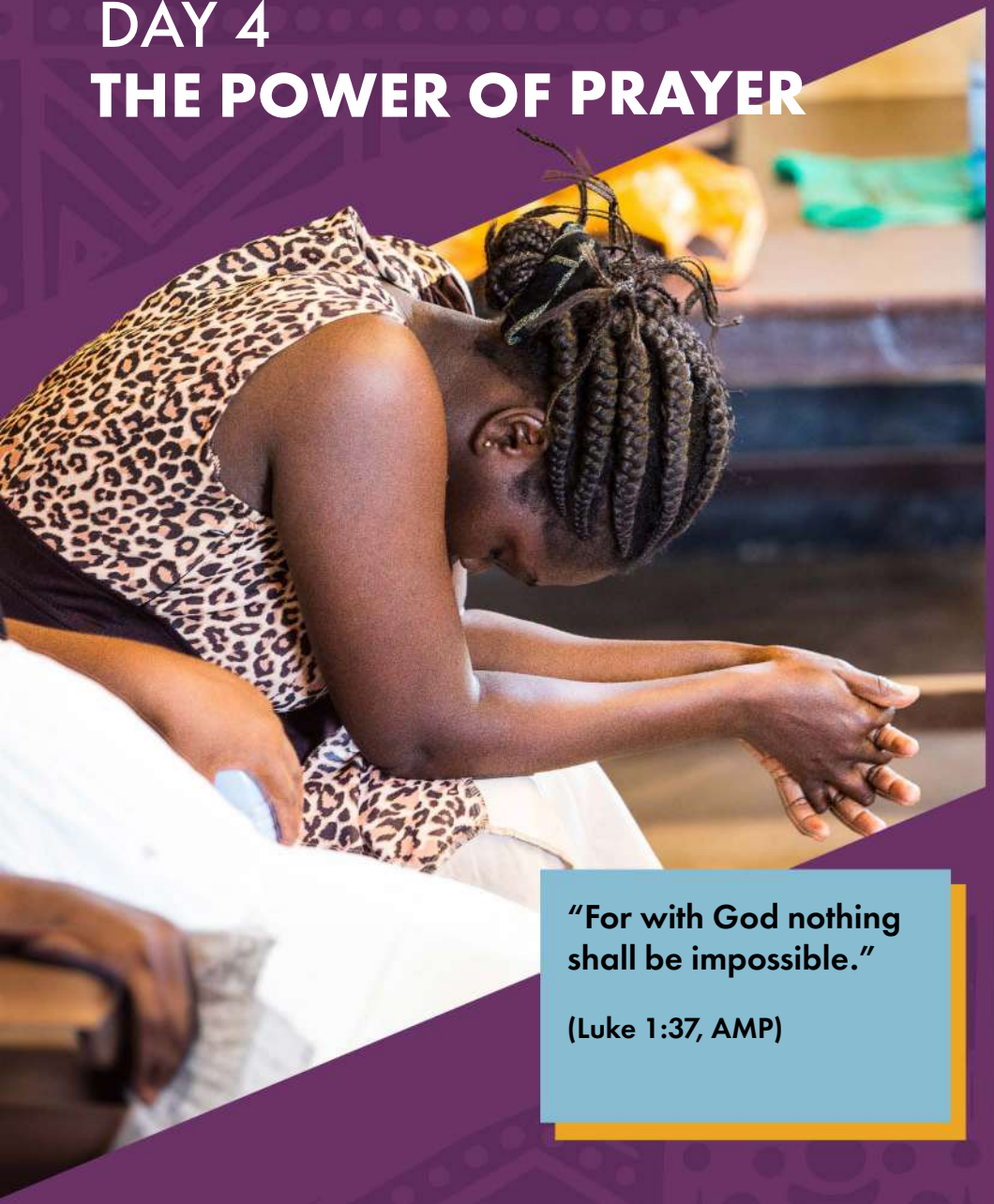
Pray Psalm 68: 5-6 over them. God the helper of the helpless! Pray also:

- For relief aid to reach the most vulnerable (women, children and the elderly)
- For children whose education is severely disrupted because of insecurity and displacement.
- That Christians will remain strong in their faith, finding hope in the Lord.
- For church leaders who, sometimes displaced themselves, try to shepherd and lead their flock in incredibly difficult circumstances.

Open Doors –

Pray for our teams/workers as they minister to those who have lost everything. That they will be a source of comfort and encouragement. Pray also for relief distribution wherever it takes place – that it'll reach those most in need, and for the safety of staff.

DAY 4
THE POWER OF PRAYER



"For with God nothing shall be impossible."

(Luke 1:37, AMP)

Rhoda Jatau was facing another Christmas in prison. The Nigerian Christian mother-of-five was arrested and imprisoned on charges of blasphemy in May 2022. While the Church did all it could to get her out, the Court refused to release her and in November 2023 also declined her bail application.

The Church decided to pray and fast, to ask God for justice for Rhoda, and brothers and sisters from around the world joined in that prayer. Then, on 9 December Rhoda was unexpectedly released on bail.

Rhoda spend Christmas with her family instead of in a prison cell. God heard and answered her and our prayers.

How must we pray?

According to the Word of God, the power of prayer derives from the power of the Almighty God. Nothing is impossible for him! (Luke 1:37)

The Lord invites His people to pray to Him with persistence (Luke 18:1), thanksgiving (Philippians 4:6), in faith (James 1:5), within the will of God (Matthew 6:10), for the glory of God (John 14:13-14), and from a heart right with God (James 5:16).

"Whatever the circumstances, prayer connects us with the Almighty God, and we should expect a response from him."

The Lord hears the prayers of His children.

"In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears" (Psalm 18:6).

The Lord answers prayers according to His perfect will and timing.

"I call on you, O God, for you will answer me" (Psalm 17:6). "The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles" (Psalm 34:17).

The power of prayer does not flow from us. It has nothing to do with the words we say or the way in which we say them, or even how often we speak these words or the physical posture we adopt while we pray.

The power of prayer comes from the omnipotent One who hears our prayers and answers them according to His perfect will and timing. Whatever the circumstances, prayer connects us with the Almighty God, and we should expect a response from him.

OD church partners visited Rhoda and her family shortly after her release to encourage them. “God is not deaf that He cannot hear the cry of His people,” Rhoda told our partners. “In His time He has proven to be faithful. Thank you to everyone who prayed for me. Your prayers have brought me out of prison! Thank you, may God bless you all.”

Christians in SSA are increasingly under pressure and their needs are growing. The only way to face this reality is to fuel both the resilience of the Persecuted Church, as well as our own, through continuous prayer with the expectation that God will move.

REFLECT

Where in your life, or in the life of those around you, have you seen the Power of Prayer at work?

APPLY

Look up and take time to meditate on passages of scripture mentioned in today’s devotional. Let them help you as you pray for the situation(s) where you and/or others need the Power of Prayer.

PRAY

The media, locally as well as global news outlets –
Pray for:

- Journalists and broadcasters, that they will be trained in and committed to how they can help shape the public discourse, faithfully and repeatedly telling the story of violence against Christians in SSA.
- Spokespeople who engage in public spaces, both in their countries and abroad, speaking on behalf of the Persecuted Church. May they be faithful witnesses, bringing glory to God, as they create awareness of the situation of the Persecuted Church in SSA.

Open Doors –

The “Live What You Believe” media project is educating and raising awareness around Freedom of Religion or Belief, using digital media in Nigeria and beyond. Pray for great engagement and that students will implement what they’ve learnt. May the knowledge and skills they acquire be used for the good and improvement of the lives of all people.

Other –

Pray also for Rhoda Jatau as she is due to appear in court some time this year. Pray for justice and that her case will be thrown out.

DAY 5
TRUSTING GOD WITH OUR PAIN



"He showed them his hands and feet."

(Luke 24: 40)

Read: Luke 24: 36 - 49

A few years ago an explosion threw me to the ground and ripped through my home. Eventually the house was cleaned up, windows were replaced, rubble cleared. But since the blast there are doors that don't close properly, windows that don't open, big gashes across the dining table - scars.

Scars that remind us of the grave reality and pain of what happened, but scars that also remind us God was with us that day, that He never left us. Scars that remind me of His faithfulness even in the worst moments.

"Scars are not imperfections. They are stories."

When you visit churches in the Middle East and North Africa you will likely encounter some churches in scarred buildings, but the scars are rarely hidden. In churches that were burned down by Daesh (or ISIS) you might see remainders of a cross or a Bible that partially survived. It has become a focal point in the building – a scar telling the story of pain but also the story of how God preserved the church. How God was with his people and how He continues to work through them.

Scars are not imperfections. They are stories. Often we try to hide our scars from others but Jesus does no such thing. In Luke 24 we see that Jesus' scars visibly told His story. They testified of His death and resurrection, of his humanity, and demonstrated to the disciples that He was very much there with them.

Sometimes God uses our scars or things we consider to be imperfections to communicate something, or to represent an encounter with Him.

Our scars tell of the glory of God. And God's Church is full of

scars that shout of His glory. Scars that remind us of God's goodness and preserving, even in times of persecution. Scars that allow us to identify with others, to minister to them and understand them in a different way. Scars, experiences of sorrow, that allow us to experience joy in a different way.

Sometimes God uses what we consider not good - our scars, failures, pain - to remind us of His grace; to remind us that we can trust Him with our pain. Over, and over, and over again. That is the glory of God.

Note that Jesus didn't have to keep the scars. God is all powerful and could have decided to conceal them. But Jesus' scars remained after His resurrection to put the glory of God on display and to tell the story not only of His death but also His resurrection. They show us that He is the risen, reigning God who allowed pain and suffering to do its worst to Him so that we might one day rise and reign with Him forever.

What if we trusted God so much with our pain that we were not ashamed of our scars?

What if we started seeing all of our own scars as platforms for the grace and glory of God to be put on display?

REFLECT

Can you see your scars as 'platforms' where God's grace and glory are on display?

APPLY

Where there is pain in your life, thank your Father in Heaven that He is with you and that you can trust him in and with it. And that there is no shame in your scars.

PRAY

Women and girls – Violent attacks not only often rob women of their husbands, these are also situations in which they are extremely vulnerable to sexual abuse, including rape. Please pray:

- That Open Doors' partners will reach these women and girls with the care they need, helping them to process the loss and trauma.
- That they can trust the Lord with their pain and scars and that He will bring healing and restoration into their lives.
- The trauma centre in Nigeria where many find rest, peace and restoration.

Open Doors –

Our staff and partners in these countries are the ones on the front line. Pray that they will remain strong in body, mind and spirit, and that the Lord will encourage them today with something special. Pray also for strength and wisdom as they navigate often complicated situations involving a lot of trauma (scars and pain), having to make difficult decisions.

DAY 6
TESTED FAITH



"Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus"

(2 Timothy 2: 3-12)

Disappointment. Fear. Discouragement. Lack of hope. All emotions that Timothy might have felt when his father in the faith, the apostle Paul, was imprisoned in Rome. "Does all that really make sense?", the young leader maybe thought to himself. Something similar to what the disciples might have gone through when Jesus, their great leader and master, died on a cross.

Read: 2 Timothy 2: 3-12

Paul writes to Timothy from prison, calling him to be strong and courageous knowing the victory we have in Christ. He doesn't say: "Play it safe and pretend we have never met, you know nothing about me and my teachings" nor "run away for your life and start over somewhere else, doing something else". Instead, Paul invites Timothy to join with him "in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God" (2 Tim 1: 8) and "in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:3).

Like a good soldier.

What does a 'good soldier' look like? Someone who has a higher goal than their "civilian affairs", namely to please their commander. In the case of the Christians it's our Saviour Jesus Christ. Only in his power are we able to endure and persevere, knowing that he is the only one who is worthy of living and dying for.

"Only in his power are we able to endure and persevere, knowing that He is the only one who is worthy of living and dying for."

Paul also compares the disciple of Christ to an athlete (v5), who can't win a race when he's not willing to stick to the rules. While others can do whatever they like, the athlete has to adhere to a strict discipline with a specific diet and routine. It might not be what he would like, but it is the way that will enable him to achieve his goal.

The third symbol is of a farmer (v6), who should be the first to receive a share of the harvest - a harvest that will certainly come. Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. That's the assurance we have, the assurance of final victory. And that's what should encourage the young leader Timothy and us today.

The faith of Bedru*, a Christian convert from Islam in Ethiopia, was tested when a group of militant Muslims set fire to his house. He gathered his family outside their burning house and started praising God, singing a song. While they were singing, his younger son, who was still a toddler, was thrown into the flames. In the end, not only was the house destroyed, but also the family's coffee plantation. Yet, Bedru declares: "Despite all of this, my wife and I have never felt like leaving the faith. Even my children do not want to go back to Islam".

Just like Bedru let us remember that our strength and power come from God himself, knowing that "if we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him" (2 Tim 2: 11-12).

I can almost hear Paul tell Timothy: "Keep on, you can do it and it's worthwhile". That's what our Father and Great Commander whispers to us in times when our faith is tested.

(*) Real name withheld for security purposes.

By: Marcia M, Content Coordinator OD Brazil

REFLECT

How do you respond when your faith is tested?

APPLY

Think of the soldier, the athlete and the farmer. Are you working on, building your faith so you can stand strong and finish the race set before you? What 'routines' might you need to work on?

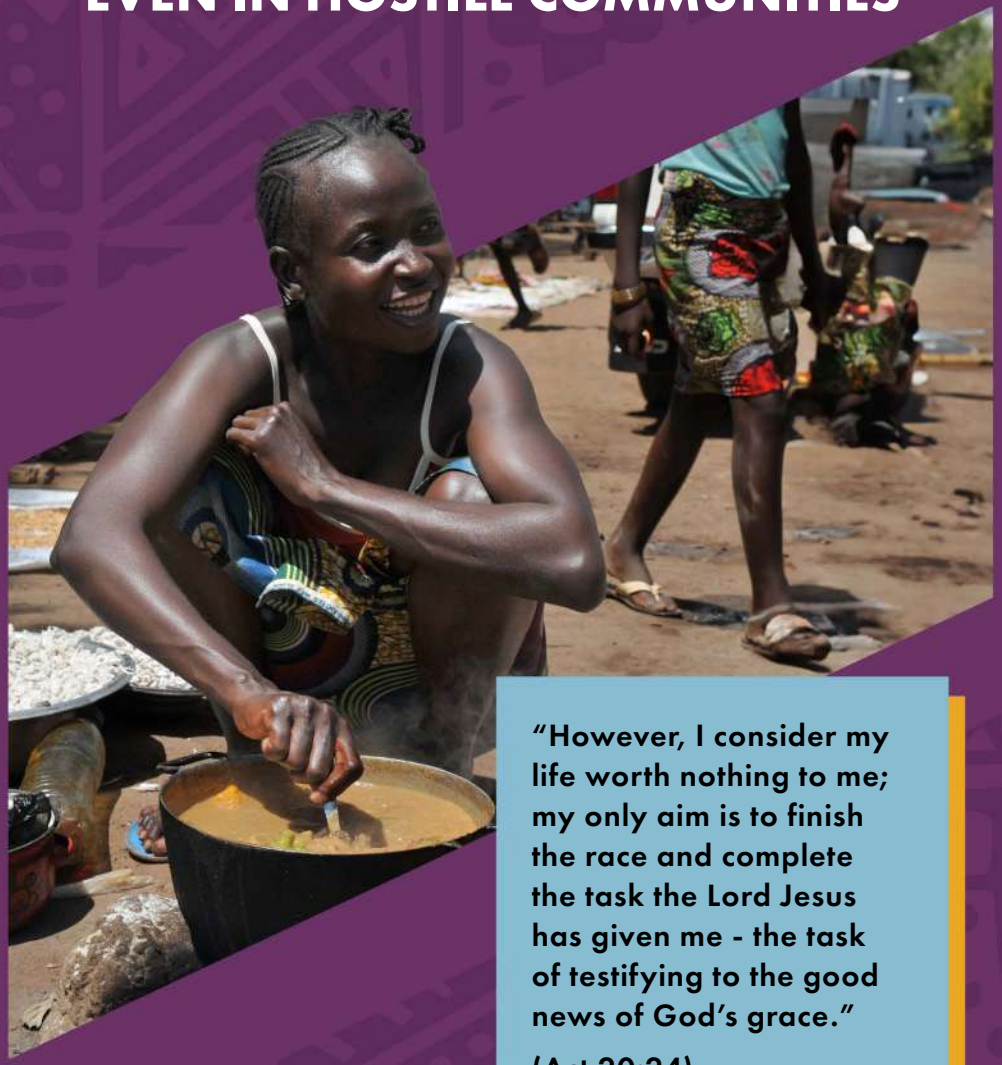
PRAY

Dear Lord, I pray that in the midst of our trials your Spirit enables us to see you. Help us not to look at the circumstances with a bitter heart, but to look at you, knowing you are the one who always sustains us, and your presence is all we need. Help us reflect on what you have done, the goodness you have showed and then have a grateful heart that will help us to grow in joy and faith, because the joy of the Lord is our strength. Amen.

Youth - Africa is the youngest continent in the world and many of our programs supporting the Persecuted Church involve young people who are deeply affected by religious persecution. Pray that:

- They will find their hope, strength and joy in the Lord, and grow strong in their faith.
- The Lord will provide for them in terms of access to Christian friends, education and work.

DAY 7
BEING SALT AND LIGHT, EVEN IN HOSTILE COMMUNITIES



"However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."

(Act 20:24)

Read: Matthew 5: 13-17

The apostle Paul considered his life worth nothing in order to be a witness of the Good News. As Christians we are called to be God's witnesses, to be "salt and light" in this world. Jesus uses these two words "salt" and "light" as metaphors. Salt acts like a preservative, purifier, and it gives flavour to food. And light functions as a guide, showing us where to go when it's dark. What Jesus is saying is that his followers are to penetrate like salt and to carry his light, even in hostile communities.

To exercise these twin roles of "salt and light", especially in hostile communities, requires extra-ordinary courage, and emotional and spiritual strength. It also requires love and compassion, and a huge commitment to self-denial.

"We bear witness by what we do and, even more so, by who and what we are."

Ever since she converted from Islam and became a follower of Jesus in 2016, Sister Nama*, from northern Bangladesh, has faced persecution and suffering. She's had to fight hard to hold on to her faith in Jesus. The closer she grew to Him, the more isolated she became from her relatives, friends, and society. "My siblings tried to kill me; they encouraged other villagers to kill me," she says. "I lost everything I had: my parents, siblings, friends, relatives, and my earthly inheritance. They tortured me physically, emotionally, and even socially."

However, persecution could not stop Nama from her work to advance the Gospel. She supports other MBB-women in their spiritual growth and helps them with their physical health as she is trained in primary health care with a particular focus on pregnant women.

Despite the opposition, Nama and her husband, who is a veterinarian, are trying to serve the people in their village to the best of their ability and there is a group who appreciates them for it. Nama is loved and respected, especially among women, because of her sincere empathy towards them and because of how she and her husband respond to those who hate them.

We bear witness by what we do and, even more so, by who and what we are. Many Christians who engage in social transformation in their communities and nations, such as Nama and her husband, face tremendous opposition and persecution. They, however, have the confidence that whether they live or die, they belong to Jesus.

(*) Real name withheld for security purposes.

REFLECT

I will consider my life nothing and die to myself to live for Jesus as “salt & light”.

APPLY

Can you think of a situation in your life that you would rather run away from but where God is calling you to be “salt and light”? Ask Him for help to be his witness in that situation.

PRAY

Lord, grant me your grace to make every effort to stand with those suffering for the sake of your Name.

Civil society - Sub-Saharan Africa is home to a diversity of people and cultures. It is a vibrant place where civil society is playing an important role in social and political life. Pray for:

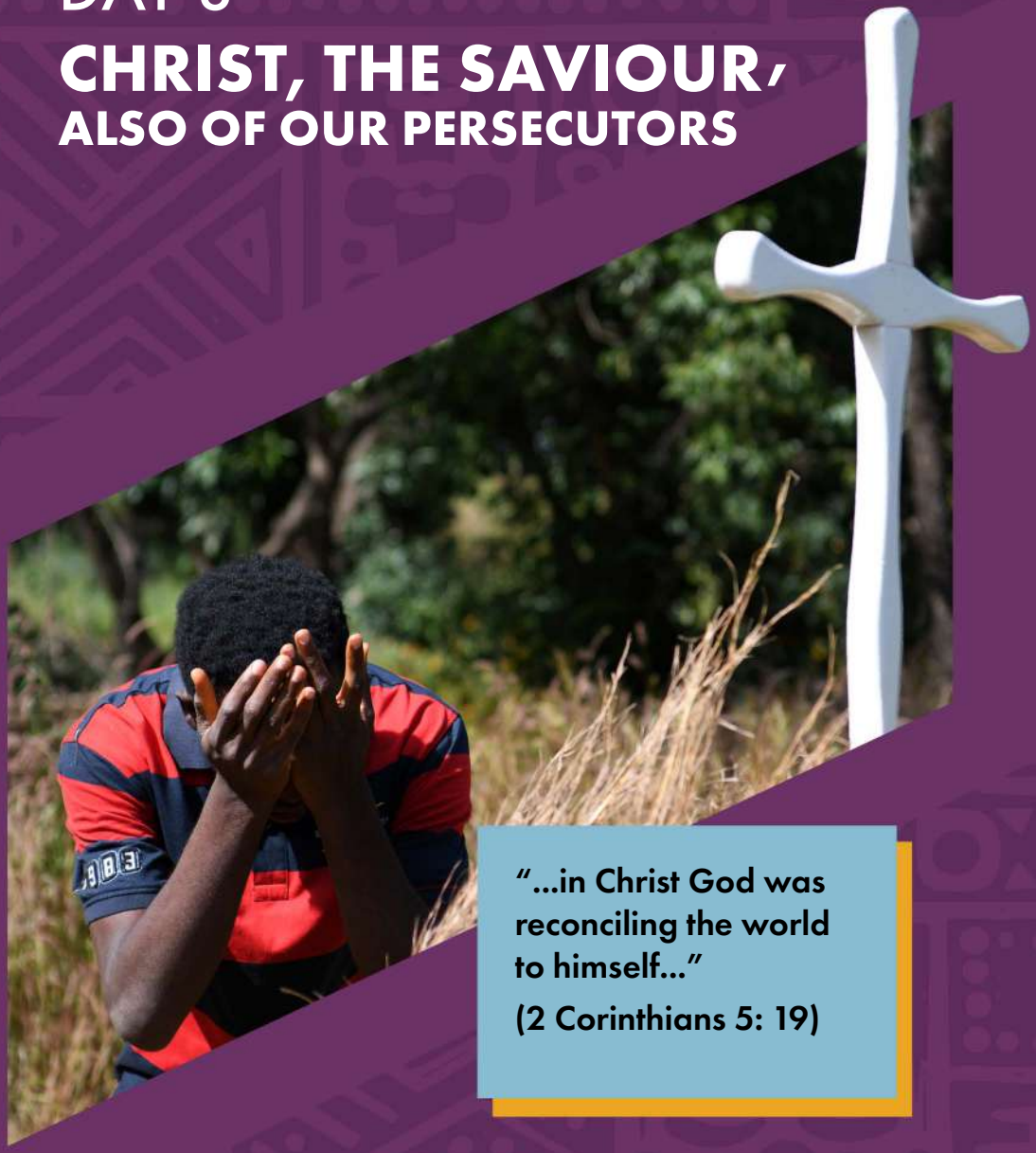
- A more united civil society that is increasingly engaging and committed to addressing the extreme violence and effects of the violence against Christians in SSA;
- A society that understands the importance of living in peace with people of other faiths.

Other -

Nigerian teenager Leah Sharibu was taken from her school in northeastern Nigeria by Islamic militants in 2018 and has been held ever since, allegedly because she refused to renounce her faith. Pray for her release and that she’ll remain strong in her faith.
Also, pray for her family who are still hoping for her return. Open Doors has called on Nigeria to create a ‘Family Liaison Officer’ in its government to communicate with and care for the families of abductees. Pray they will actively work towards this.

DAY 8

CHRIST, THE SAVIOUR, ALSO OF OUR PERSECUTORS



"...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself..."
(2 Corinthians 5: 19)

Read: 2 Corinthians 5: 14 - 20

For a disciple it can be difficult to digest that God grants freedom to the forces of chaos and evil. It is part of His sovereignty. The world is not dominated by chaos and evil, rather chaos and evil are granted dominion over the world. It is a fact that hearts and destinies are in the hands of the Sovereign God, so even the hardened heart of the most brutal persecutor can be turned into **flesh**.

This scandalizes us, just as it was shocking for Jonah to accept the idea of pointing the enemies in the direction of salvation: what scandalous grace is this? Surely it is a grace that is not based on a pardon, but on redemption paid at great cost with shed blood and broken **flesh**. It was on that cross that every execution was carried out, including mine, including the persecutor's.

The dark temptation to hate and fight the persecutor makes us forget that our war is not against **flesh** and blood. And it is in this spiritual oblivion that the forces of evil find room in our hearts.

"Every flesh, every man - even the persecutor - longs for that perfect place from which he came and where he is destined to return to!"

The antidote is **to remember the other's humanity**. Paradoxically, I should remember that the other is flesh and blood like me, and that we are both in need of Christ who became incarnate to save us.

On Ghana's Cape Coast stands a fortress that is included on the UNESCO World Heritage List and is kept to remind us of the transatlantic slave trade in the 1600s. During this time thousands of Africans were crammed in underground cells for

weeks, naked and forced to survive amidst rats and their own excrement. They screamed, cried and died of hardship or insanity.

All this is abhorrent, yet of human cruelty we have endless examples. *Nothing new under the sun*, as Ecclesiastes notes.

But here is what I find truly shocking: above those cells, a church had been built where faithful Christians sang hymns to God, heard sermons about Jesus' love, and gave offerings to the poor. On a regular basis someone was sent down to silence the imprisoned slaves but they rarely succeeded, and so it was not uncommon to hear their moans during the service.

How is this possible?

It is possible. By forgetting the other person's humanity.

If **God chose to become man** in order to reconcile everything to himself (2 Cor 5:19), there must be something intrinsically wonderful in our **flesh**. In my own, my brother's, my enemy's...

If you remove sin from the Bible, you will be left with the first two chapters in Genesis and the final two in Revelation, from a perfect garden to a perfect city. Every flesh, every man (even the persecutor!) longs for that perfect place from which he came and where he is destined to return to!

Flesh and blood are still a mystery to be explored. It will help us to love our neighbor, to understand that Christ is the Saviour even of the persecutor.

And in an age when we will have machines (AI) preaching in our place, flesh and incarnation will return to be central to our faith.

REFLECT

Philippians 2:3-11, an anthem to the incarnation.

APPLY

A famous example of "a persecutor's heart turned to flesh" is John Newton, the author of the song 'Amazing Grace'. Pray for the salvation of the 'persecutors' in your life.

PRAY

The perpetrators - Pray for :

- Islamist militants and members of Islamic State affiliated groups who are attacking the Church across Sub-Saharan Africa; that the Lord will soften their hearts and draw them to Himself, leading to repentance.
- State and non-state actors in places where there is political violence. That they will repent and choose the path of peace.

Open Doors – Open Doors' advocates are speaking up about the plight of Christians in SSA. Pray:

- They will have favour with policy and decision makers in the halls of power.
- That the international community will acknowledge and act against the extreme violence that is tearing communities and families apart.

Other – Pray also for the lawyers who choose to come alongside victims of religiously motivated violence. Pray for courage and for their protection.

DAY 9
NOT ASHAMED



"So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord..."

(2 Timothy 1: 8a)

Read: 2 Timothy 1: 6 – 16

Paul's second letter to Timothy contains the last words written by the apostle, who is going through one of the most critical moments of his life as a minister. The fury of the Roman Empire's highest ruler once again has driven him to prison where he was eventually beheaded. Here are some of the conditions surrounding Paul at the time he wrote this letter:

- He is unable to carry out his itinerant ministry.
- He is awaiting a final judgment from which he expects only death (2 Timothy 4:6-8).
- Those whom he had hoped better things from, had abandoned him (2 Timothy 1:15).
- He has a deep desire to see Timothy (2 Timothy 4:9, 11, 21).
- He is concerned that false teachers will continue to disturb the faith of some (2 Timothy 2:17-18).

Paul had sent Timothy, described in Paul's letters as an affectionate but shy young man, to shepherd the church in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) where false teachers were causing unrest.

As a young minister, Timothy faced all kinds of pressures, conflicts and challenges from within the church and the culture around him.

Timothy is intimidated by the circumstances and verse 8 indicates he is ashamed to be a disciple of Christ and to have a leader like Paul who is imprisoned in Rome. Faced with this, Paul asks Timothy *to stand firm in the face of continuing false teachers and, therefore, persecution.*

Brothers and sisters, circumstances often don't change for those who stand in the truth, but the scriptures say: God

has not given us a spirit of cowardice, so we must not let ourselves be carried away by fear. For it is fear that often petrifies and intimidates us.

In verse 12, Paul says that he is not ashamed of the gospel. For he understands that it is a privilege to be an apostle and teacher. At the same time he knows that it is a responsibility that involves suffering and even giving up one's life.

> "Paul understands it is a privilege to be an apostle and teacher of the Gospel. But he also knows it is a responsibility that involves suffering."

Paul's firmness is in contrast with the cowardice of today's leaders who want the privileges that come with the position but don't accept and take responsibility.

Just like Paul, many in the persecuted Church understand this privilege and, despite all the threats they face, they do not give up or feel ashamed. They use all the opportunities they get.

Take Josué*, for example, a missionary in Colombia but who was born to be a 'mamo' (indigenous leader). When he decided to follow Jesus and become a missionary in the region where he lives, he challenged his family and community. He was not ashamed of being a Christian or leaving his community's beliefs. On the contrary. He courageously took the responsibilities that come with being a missionary together with risks of persecution, because following Christ is worth it.

Finally, what a great model we have in Paul. He not only invited Timothy to not be ashamed, but by his life and example he himself showed he never was ashamed of Jesus.

(*) Real name withheld for security purposes.

REFLECT: Do you know someone who is not ashamed of Jesus? What makes them "stand in the truth"?

APPLY: Do you ever feel ashamed of Jesus? Ask the Lord to help you overcome this.

PRAY: *Lord, please help us to enjoy the privilege of serving in your work and help us to take on the responsibility that this entails.*

Converts – pray for those who converted to Christianity from another religion – for example Islam or a Traditional African Religion - to follow Jesus. Their decision can expose them to high levels of persecution from their family and community. Pray:

- That they will remain firm in their newly found faith and not be ashamed.
- For protection from attacks
- That God will provide whatever they need, be it a roof over their heads, safety or food.
- That God will place other Christians around them, to encourage and be encouraged by.

This is the last day in our nine days of praying and fasting for the Church in SSA. But this is not where our work or our prayers end. If you want to stay informed about how you can pray, stay in touch with those who gave you this brochure.