

## On Religion

## Pastors Points: Christianity has been a target since the beginning

"Islamic State militants have abducted as many as 90 Assyrian Christians, including women and children."

Such was the news headline that I read on Tuesday morning as I began to write my Pastors Point article for today. Immediately upon reading these words,

I couldn't help but imagine what this will likely mean for those unfortunate captives based on the many images and stories that



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continue to pour out of the Middle East. It means forced conversions, torture, rape, beheadings, being shot or crucified . . . if they are "lucky" a few may be sold into slavery. The ugliness being perpetrated by ISIL is staggering, and what is perhaps most frustrating is that there appears to be no immediate end in sight.

Even if our administration took a firmer and more realistic stance in dealing with Muslim extremists (beginning with not shying away from accurate terminology) and were to be buoyed further by the help of other Middle East nations, the sad truth is that Christians will continue to be persecuted and killed with frightening frequency worldwide. Chris-

tianity has had a big target on its back from its very beginnings. Typical statistics thrown around concerning Christian martyrdom from the first century till now often approaches 70 million with half of that number actually being tallied in the 20th century alone! An important book on religious persecutions is *The Price of Freedom Denied*, by sociologists Brian J. Grim (associate scholar at the Religious Freedom Project of Georgetown University's Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs) and Roger Finke (Dept. of sociology and Criminology at Penn. St.). They affirm that the number of Christian martyrs per year may now be higher than earlier estimates, between

130,000 and 160,000. Even if, as one researcher suggested, "Perhaps we should downsize the figure to that of the figure offered by Barrett and Johnson (at the Center for Study of Global Christianity) and their estimate of 105,000 martyrs per year, that would make between 287 and 288 martyrs per day: twelve per hour, or one every five minutes. At any rate, figures are horribly high."

Now all this is horrible, but it is no surprise — Jesus and the NT writers were careful to repeatedly warn believers they could often expect such treatment. Consider statements like "...but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you...No servant is greater than his master. If they

persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (Jn. 15: 19, 20); "...for you yourselves know that we have been destined for this. For indeed when we were with you, we kept telling you in advance that we were going to suffer affliction..." (I Thess. 3:3,4).

Look carefully...the world is getting a front row view of one of the very basic differences between Christianity and Muslim extremists. Groups like ISIL view innocent Christians (and others) as enemies worthy of brutalization, holding to the conviction that even should they die in their attempts to slaughter and enslave, they are promised a lusty reward in the afterlife. Conversely, Jesus promised a reward for those

"who are persecuted for his sake" (Matt. 5:11,12), and he taught "to love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43,44). This is why we do not read of bands of Christian groups ambushing towns and beheading, raping, or enslaving—which explains our confused president having to refer to the Crusades a millennium ago to find anything that even approached a similarity.

In contrast to what is going on overseas, believers in America presently face little hostility, but we need to be loudly voicing our concerns to our government officials about our persecuted brothers and sisters in the Middle East and providing aid / praying for them.