

Forced to Flee – Acts 8:1-4

Introduction to Release International

[S2▶] Release International is a Christian ministry called by God to love and serve persecuted Christians. [S3▶] We were founded in 1968 through the inspiration of Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian pastor who was imprisoned for his faith for 14 years during the Communist era. Some of you may have read his well-known book *Tortured for Christ* which tells his story. After he was released Richard was able to escape to the West and he made it his mission to let Christians here know about their fellow believers suffering persecution, and to challenge us to stand with them.

[S4▶] Today we continue that legacy. We work with partners on the ground in around 30 countries across the world bringing all kinds of prayerful, pastoral and practical support to Christians who suffer because of their faith. [S5▶] And there is also an important UK facing side the ministry. We want to call Christians in the UK into fellowship with our persecuted brothers and sisters so we can support them, but also so that we can learn lessons of Christian discipleship with them.

Introduction to ‘Flight’

[S6▶] According the UN Refugee Agency, as of December 2022 there were 108 million people across the world who had been forcibly displaced from their homes. That is either because of armed conflict, general violence, human rights violations, or persecution. It includes people who have crossed borders and had to leave their home country, and it also includes what we call ‘internally displaced people’ - that is people who have had to flee within their own country. What is striking about those numbers is that they have more than doubled in the last decade. This refugee crisis really is one of the key stories of our time.

[S7▶] And millions of our Christian brothers and sisters are caught up in this. Sometimes because of war which affects the whole population in an area, but also sometimes specifically because of their faith. Because they are known to be followers of Jesus they are not tolerated and sometimes their only option is to leave.

When we hear about the scale of these problems we can feel overwhelmed. When we hear the statistics, and we see the world map with all these arrows, it can feel like the problem is too big and there is nothing we can really do to make a difference.

But it is important for us to remember that behind every one of these statistics are the stories of real individual people and families. People who are just like you and me. And it is possible for us to get to know some of these stories. It is possible for us to pray for some of these people. It is possible for us to support some of the projects that are helping them.

Voice Magazine Story – Pastor Dmitry

[S8▶] In our current Voice magazine we tell the story of Pastor Dmitry from Ukraine. Dmitry was working in the city of Melitopol which was annexed by the Russians when they invaded in March 2022. Dmitry told us that in the first week of the invasion the Russians began investigating churches and arresting people. On 19th March, 15 soldiers came to his house and separated him from his family. They took him to his church while they searched the building and then they put a black bag over his head and took him away for interrogation.

His interrogators told him that they hated evangelical Christians. After 8 days he was released but when he tried to go back to work the Russians wanted him to give them information about everyone in the church and they wanted to read his sermons and approve them before he preached. Lots of other pastors were being arrested and some were tortured. Dmitry decided his only option was to flee with his family to Poland. This is now the third time in his life he has been forced to flee because of his Christian faith.

Bible Reflection - Scattered

[S9▶] One of the things we always want to do at Release International is to have a biblical perspective on the subject of persecution. We should be moved by the humanitarian tragedy of the situation but we also need to think about persecution and displacement at a deeper theological level. And when we read the Bible we find out that it has a lot to say about the subject and maybe some of that challenges our natural instincts as 21st century Westerners. So I want to share some verses with you just now that speak about this idea of 'flight.' [S10▶]

¹ And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ² Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. ³ But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. ⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. (ESV UK)

If you are familiar with the book of Acts you'll know that it begins with Jesus speaking to his disciples just before he ascends to heaven. He tells them that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them, and they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In chapter 2 the Holy Spirit comes just as Jesus said, and the church begins to grow dramatically. Thousands are added to their number. But for the next few chapters this growing group of Christians is confined to the city of Jerusalem. They have not yet moved out to all Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. What will prompt them to go?

Well, it's not long before they start to experience opposition from the Jewish leaders just as Jesus had said they would. And this opposition culminates in the martyrdom of Stephen - at the end of chapter 7, Stephen is killed by the mob because of his testimony

about Jesus. And we wonder, will this opposition signal the end of the church just as it's getting started? But then we have Acts chapter 8.

What we encounter at the start of Acts 8 is essentially a refugee crisis. Because of the growing opposition from the religious authorities it becomes impossible for the new Christians to stay in Jerusalem and the majority of them have to pack their bags and leave. This would have meant leaving their families behind, taking their children out of school, perhaps leaving a good job and a nice home, and facing poverty, vulnerability and uncertainty – much the same kind of issues that refugees today are facing. It would have been traumatising and extremely difficult.

And yet, what Luke shows us in the storyline of Acts is that this refugee crisis, caused by persecution, was actually instrumental in fulfilling God's purposes for the world. Verse 4 says, 'Those who were scattered went about preaching the word.' It is this Christian refugee crisis that first prompts the church to move beyond Jerusalem. It is this Christian refugee crisis that first propels God's people to be Jesus' witnesses in all Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

God was able to take the evil acts directed against his people and somehow he turned them round to accomplish his good purposes. We know that this is how God works – the Bible reveals it over and over again from the story of Joseph in Genesis, right through to the book of Acts.

[S11▶] And God still works like this today. Not always in straight lines that are easy for us to understand, especially in the moment as these difficult things are happening. Persecution is a very difficult thing. Displacement causes great trauma. But we can trust that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. Christian refugees have not been abandoned by God. Wherever they go, he goes with them, and in their suffering they bear the message of God's own suffering love for the world. As they are scattered they go about preaching the word.

Call to action

I want to encourage you to respond to this. As Christians we are part of a global family, we belong to the one body of Christ and when one part of that body suffers, every part should feel it.

[S12▶] Please do pick up a copy our *Voice* magazine at the table afterwards so you can find out more about some of these stories. The magazine comes with a daily prayer diary to help you pray into some of the situations we have thought about. It's free and if you fill in one of our Stay in Touch cards we'd love to send it to you regularly by post or email along with some of our other news and prayer communications. Praying is one of the most important things we can do for our persecuted brothers and sisters – it's what they always ask us to do. So please do sign-up to get these resources today.

And there are lots of other resources available on our website, YouTube channel and podcast. These are all things that can help you to hear the voice of our persecuted brothers and sisters.

[S13▶] And finally, please do consider giving financially towards our work. Our current appeal focuses on the story of Luul and Grace. Luul is a pastor from Eritrea who spent 14 years in prison because of his Christian work. He was pastoring a thriving church and had led over 500 people to the Lord. But when he was arrested his life changed forever. He was sentenced without trial and he was never allowed to appeal. He was moved between three prisons and kept in a tiny cell, and his family were never told of his whereabouts. Fearing for their lives his wife Grace and their young daughter Wisdom were forced to flee the country and eventually arrived in the UK.

In prison Pastor Luul was beaten and tortured. But his faith stayed strong. He was even able to lead some of the soldiers and prison guards to Christ. Eventually in 2021 he was released. He managed to escape Eritrea and just last year he was finally reunited with his wife and daughter.

As we have already seen, Pastor Luul's story is not unique and Release International's partners are working hard to help people like Luul and his family who are mistreated and forced to flee because of their faith in Christ.

In Matthew 25 Jesus taught us that whatever we do for the least of his brothers and sisters, we do for Him. When you help persecuted believers like Luul, your gift becomes a powerful testimony of Christ's love in action. So if you are able please do consider giving generously towards this appeal. You can make a donation here today, or you can go to our website releaseinternational.org and give online.

[S14▶] Thank you very much for the opportunity to share with you this morning. May God bless you.