

Last week's *Laptop* included a story from *The Insanity of God*, a powerful book of true experiences of persecuted believers around the world, written by my fraternity brother, Nik Ripken. In this week's concluding excerpt from the end of the book, I invite you to consider carefully the questions that Nik asks of us:

Ruth and I often share the stories that we have heard and the things that we have learned to help the western church and many of its congregations grasp a new, and perhaps more biblical, perspective on suffering and persecution in our faith. We share often about how suffering and persecution relate to our faith.

We desperately want our western brothers and sisters in Christ to realize that the greatest enemy of our faith today is not communism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Atheism, or even Islam. **Our greatest enemy is lostness.** Lostness is the terrible enemy that Jesus commissioned His followers to vanquish with the battle strategy that He spelled out for them in Matthew 28:18–20. He was addressing this same enemy when He plainly clarified His purpose in coming: *"I have come to seek and to save those who are lost."*

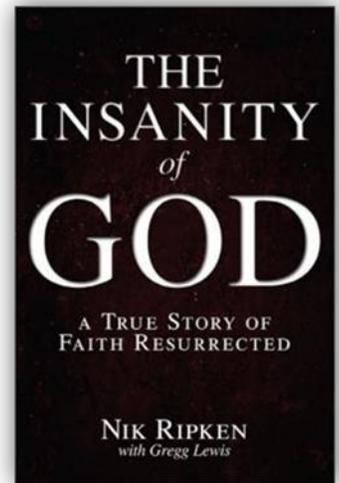
Our hope is that believers around the world will get close enough to the heart of God that the first images that come to mind when we hear the word "Muslim" are not Somali pirates or suicide bombers or violent jihadists or even terrorists. When we hear the word "Muslim," we need to see and think of each and every individual Muslim as a lost person who is loved by God. We need to see each Muslim as a person in need of God's grace and forgiveness. We need to see each Muslim as someone for whom Christ died. . . .

We seem to forget that Jesus Himself promised that the world would reject and mistreat His faithful followers just as it rejected Him. Could it be that the only way that Almighty God could actually answer prayers asking Him to end the persecution of believers . . . would be to stop people from accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior? If people stopped accepting Christ as Lord and Savior . . . persecution would end immediately. That would be the only way to completely end persecution.

It sounds like a ridiculous question, but should we really be asking God for the end of persecution? By doing that, we might unknowingly be asking that people not come to faith in Christ!

Ruth and I have seldom encountered a mature believer living in persecution who asked us to pray that their persecution would cease. In fact, we have never heard that request. Rather, believers in persecution ask us to pray that "they would be faithful and obedient *through* their persecution and suffering." That is a radically different prayer.

Why is it that millions of the global followers of Jesus who actively practice their faith live in environments where persecution is the norm? **The first and most basic answer is that these people have given their lives to Jesus. The second answer is that they have determined in their hearts that they will not keep Jesus to themselves.** Having found faith in Christ, they have such a passion for Jesus that they must share the Good News of His sacrificial love and forgiveness with their families, their friends, and their neighbors. By doing that, these believers are choosing to be persecuted.



What that means is that, for most believers, persecution is completely avoidable. If someone simply leaves Jesus alone, doesn't seek Him or follow Him, then persecution will simply not happen. Beyond that, even if someone becomes a follower of Jesus, persecution will likely not happen if the faith is kept private and personal. If a person is silent about their faith in Jesus, the chance of being persecuted is very small.

So if our goal is reducing persecution, that task is easily achieved. First, just leave Jesus alone. Second, if you do happen to find Him, just keep Him to yourself. Persecution stops immediately where there is no faith and where there is no witness. **The reason for persecution, then, is that people keep finding Jesus—and, then, they refuse to keep Him to themselves.**

Believers in persecution taught us another important truth. The freedom to believe and witness has nothing to do with the government or political system. The freedom to believe and witness has nothing to do with the civil and political rights that might or might not be present.

This is one of the most important lessons that we learned from believers in persecution: They (and you and I) are just as free to share Jesus today in Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Communist countries as you and I are in America. It isn't a matter of political freedom. It is a simply matter of obedience. The price for obedience might be different in different places—but it is *always* possible to obey Christ's call to make disciples. Every believer—in every place—is *always* free to make that choice.

Jesus' last instruction to His disciples was to be witnesses to all peoples. He did not limit His mission to western, democratic, or "free" countries. It was a blanket commandment. It was not a suggestion, or a recommendation, or an option. It was a commandment for all of His followers—to share His message with all peoples.

True to Scripture, believers in persecution would remind us that we are all equally free and equally responsible to share Jesus in every corner of the globe. **The question is never, "Am I free to do that?" Rather, the question is, "Will I be obedient?"** Believers in the world of persecution have already decided their answer to that crucial question.

Perhaps some of us have not yet settled the matter. The question we must answer is whether or not we have the courage to bear the consequences of obediently exercising our freedom to be salt and light to all peoples, wherever they live. The consequences for our obedience may be suffering and persecution. Even then, we are free to obey.

Time and again, believers in persecution have demonstrated the power of determined and courageous faith. Time and time again, they have obeyed. They have willingly accepted the consequences of their obedience. Even in the most repressive places, these believers have understood that they are utterly free to obey Jesus. . . .

Not long ago, Ruth and I were part of a response team that ministered to workers in a Muslim country after three colleagues were martyred by a militant Islamic fundamentalist. Understandably, that was a grief-filled, emotion-laden, and spiritually-challenging time.

Even so, what many of us who were there remember most from those days is *joy*. Of course, there was profound grief—immense grief. But the joy was unmistakable. During that time, we sensed

an unearthly, heavenly identification. These servants, in their deaths, had partnered with our Master and His cross. They had shouldered their own crosses for the sake of Jesus and for the sake of witness.

During our time of grieving, we learned an important spiritual lesson: before we can grasp the full meaning of the Resurrection, we first have to witness or experience crucifixion. If we spend our lives so afraid of suffering, so averse to sacrifice, that we avoid even the risk of persecution or crucifixion, then we might never discover the true wonder, joy and power of a resurrection faith. *Ironically, avoiding suffering could be the very thing that prevents us from partnering deeply with the Risen Jesus. . . .*

All over the world we encountered committed followers of Jesus who trust even His toughest teachings. They understand that anyone who wishes to save his life must first be willing to lose it. They are willing to take that risk because they believe that, ultimately, good *will* defeat evil. Love will finally overcome hate. And life will conquer death forever by the power of our resurrection faith. They know that the final chapter of the greatest story ever told has already been written. And they know that, in the end, and, for all eternity, God will have His way.

In the meantime, in the here and now, a real battle continues. This is the same spiritual battle that the apostle Paul talked about. First-century believers understood Paul when he described an epic struggle that was *“not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms”* (Ephesians 6:12). Followers of Jesus in persecution today understand this battle well.

In fact, everyone in the world today who claims to be a follower of Jesus plays a part in this battle. Faithful believers who are paying a personal price in pain and persecution for the cause of Christ truly understand the crux and the cost of their faith. Their witness, their lives and their examples should inspire and instruct us. Their experience reveals what is at stake, and their experience also reveals much about evil and its power.

Believers who know what it means to suffer for their faith help us recognize and understand the Enemy’s tactics and his ultimate goal. Satan at his worst, evil at its core, and persecution in its essence does not overtly seek to starve, beat, imprison, torture, or kill followers of Jesus. The strategy of Satan is simpler and more diabolical than that. What is Satan’s paramount intent? Quite simply, it is this: denying the world access to Jesus!

Satan’s greatest desire is for the people of this planet to leave Jesus alone. Satan desires that we turn away from Jesus—or that we never find Him in the first place. If Satan cannot be successful at that, he desires to keep believers quiet, to diminish or silence our witness, and to stop us from bringing others to Christ. It is that simple.

Once we understand the nature of this spiritual battle and the strategy of the Enemy, we see clearly the role that believers have been called to play. We also see the importance of our choices regarding witness and faithfulness and obedience.

At the beginning of every day, we choose. It is simply a matter of identification. Will we identify with believers in persecution—or will we identify with their persecutors? We make that choice as we decide whether we will share Jesus with others or keep Him to ourselves.

We identify ourselves as believers by taking a stand with, and following the example of, those in persecution. Or we identify with their persecutors by not giving witness of Jesus to our family, our friends, and our enemies. Those who number themselves among the followers of Jesus—but don't witness for Him—are actually siding with the Taliban, the brutal regime that rules North Korea, the secret police in communist China, and the Somalis and Saudi Arabia's of the world. Believers who do not share their faith aid and abet Satan's ultimate goal of denying others access to Jesus. Our silence makes us accomplices.

When Ruth and I speak and teach and share with western churches, we are often asked if we believe that persecution is coming to America. My response is often rather pointed. I say, quite sincerely, "Why would Satan want to wake us up when he has already shut us up?" Why would Satan bother with us when we are already accomplishing his goal? He will likely conclude that it is better to let us sleep.

Our problem is not simply a lack of concern. And our problem is not that we are unaware or disinterested. We know what is happening around the world. Certainly, in light of what we have encountered in this book, we know about sacrifices that are made for the faith. We know more about the health and the whereabouts of other members of the body of Christ today than at any other time in history.

It's not enough to feel grateful for the blessed circumstances in which we live. It's not even enough to do a better job remembering and praying for the suffering believers around the world. It's not even enough to identify with the other parts of Christ's Body around the world.

Ultimately, the problem is one of emphasis and focus. Instead of recognizing, thinking about, remembering, praying about, identifying with and focusing on the *suffering* of fellow believers around the world, we would do well to shift our focus. Quite simply, we would do well to ask ourselves whether or not we are being obedient to Jesus. He is asking us—He is expecting us—He is commanding us to share Him wherever we go. He is commanding us to do that wherever we are today.

It is a simply matter of obedience. If He is our Lord, then we will obey Him. If we do not obey Him, then He is not our Lord. **Perhaps the question should not be: "Why are others persecuted?" Perhaps the better question is: "Why are we not?"**

I don't know about you, but these words give me a lot to think about

Dave

The Joshua Code: Fifty-Two Verses Every Believer Should Know **O.S. Hawkins (Thomas Nelson, 2012)**

Week nineteen: GOD'S RECIPE FOR REVIVAL

"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14).

During a recent Christmas season, while I was passing through our kitchen where my wife was busy preparing the big family meal, my eyes fell on an old notecard that had yellowed with the years. Looking closely, I saw my mother's handwriting on it. It was her old recipe for one of my favorite dishes. When done precisely as the directions said, it tasted exactly like my mother used to make it!

Within the heart of each of us is a longing for something more, a season of new spiritual refreshing, a personal revival, if you please. God has His own recipe for revival in our hearts. He has written it down for all of us: *"If My people will . . . then I will hear from heaven."* And when this recipe is followed precisely and put into practice, it will result in a new spirit reanimating us and enabling us to soar into spiritual regions some of us may have never known.

GOD'S DESIRE *"If My people . . . then . . ."*

God is waiting, willing, and longing to send a new spirit of revival to His people. However, He does not overrule our own will. Consequently, in a very real sense, while revival is always the sovereign work of Almighty God, it is also conditional. The Bible says, *"If My people . . ."* If certain conditions are met, certain results will follow.

GOD'S DESIGN *"If MY people . . ."*

Revival is conditional upon God's own people. Hear His invitation: *"If My people . . ."* The real story behind any revival in history begins when God's own people become convicted of neglect and begin to beseech the throne for a fresh wind of His Spirit. Reading the history of many great awakenings reveals that they usually begin with one man or one woman who becomes desperate for what the psalmist called "fresh oil" (Psalm 92:10).

GOD'S DEMAND *"humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways"*

God's demand begins with a call for His own people to "humble themselves," to recognize and confess their need to seek Him in all things. The Christian must be on constant vigil to avoid the temptation of spiritual pride and self-centeredness. True humility involves a broken spirit before the Lord.

Every true revival in history has been born and cradled in the place of prayer. If believers today spent as much time seeking His face as we do seeking His hand, we would be on the way to revival.

God's demand also includes turning from our "wicked ways." Sin that is unconfessed and therefore unforgiven is the greatest obstacle to revival.

GOD'S DELIGHT *"I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."*

God's delight is to forgive and cleanse us of our sin. Why? So that we might appropriate all that the cross of Christ involves, so that, as far as we might personally be concerned, His death would not be in vain. God delights more in healing our hearts and our homes than we do ourselves. He is willing, waiting, and longing to be faithful because of conditions we are called to meet.