

“The End of the Spear”

Acts 5:41-42 ¹

Many of you will recognize the title of this sermon, “The End of the Spear,” as the title of the 2006 film retelling the martyrdom of Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully and Roger Youderian on January 8, 1956.² These men were killed by the Auca Indians in South America while they were trying to take the Gospel to that tribe, and God has used their deaths in a powerful way to reach the Aucas and many thousands of others around the world with the Good News of Jesus.

Christians who have shared their faith have been persecuted from the very beginning of the Christian movement, and Jesus had told His disciples it would be so: “*If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first*” (John 15:18). As Acts 5 begins, the disciples had become enormously popular among the people as they preached about Jesus, crucified and resurrected, and we’re told that the religious leaders of Israel were “*filled with jealousy*” about the disciples’ growing influence (5:17).³ The Jewish leaders found a pretext to have the apostles arrested, but angels released them in the night and they returned to their preaching the next morning.

Arrested a second time, the apostles were badly beaten and told not to speak in the name of Jesus; but *the apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah* (Acts 5:41-42). Keep that image in your mind. I’ll come back to it at the end.

His name was Nik.⁴ When he arrived on my college campus as a freshman, he was about as “country” as one could imagine. A farm boy whose life had been restricted to about a ten-mile radius, Nik came from an unbelieving family, but he had met Jesus along the way and had decided to pursue his education—the first from his family to do so.

Nik and I ended up in the same fraternity, and later, when Nik met his first international missionary at our Baptist Student Union, that experience helped to solidify his sense of call to missional vocation. To greatly shorten the story, Nik also met Ruth at college, a pastor’s daughter who shared his sense of call, and they were eventually appointed as Baptist missionaries to Malawi.

Although Nik and Ruth and their three sons absolutely loved their work in Malawi, they all contracted repeated cases of malaria such that they had to relocate to South Africa for survival. After spending several years working in the black townships of South Africa during apartheid, they moved to Kenya, where Nik became involved in relief work in Somalia during the worst years of the their civil war and famine. Indeed, during the Battle of Mogadishu, memorialized in the film, *Black Hawk Down*, Nik was feeding the hungry only a mile away.⁵

After half a dozen years working in Somalia, during which time virtually every follower of Jesus was killed or run out of the country, Nik despairingly decided that he needed more knowledge about how Christ might be made known in countries of persecution. That began what

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on February 3, 2013.

² *The End of the Spear* (Every Tribe Entertainment, 2006), written by Bill Ewing, Bart Gavigan and Jim Hanon, directed by Jim Hanon, produced by William Bowling; on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of these events.

³ Jealousy has a long history in creation. Satan’s temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 grew out of jealousy, as did Cain’s murder of Abel in Genesis 4. There are many other examples.

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

⁵ Their sixteen year-old son, Tim, died in Nairobi of an asthma attack and is buried there.

has become a thirty-year pilgrimage to talk with believers in nearly seventy nations around the world. From his humble farm beginnings, Nik has become the world's foremost authority on the persecution of Christians, especially in Muslim contexts, and this month he published a gripping account of that journey, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected*.⁶

Nik is the most amazing follower of Jesus I've ever known, and the person most like Paul I've ever known, as well. Indeed, like Paul, Nik lives in constant pain, the result of overdoses of malarial drugs in Malawi and exposure to toxins in Somalia. I've heard Nik tell the stories in this book first-hand, and I want to tell one of them to you this morning.

"To me," Nik wrote, "the most startling thing Jesus ever said was when He assigned His followers the task of going out in pairs to share His good news with lost people. He said that He was sending them 'as sheep among wolves.' And Jesus made it clear that He expected them to prevail, even though no sheep has ever won a fight with a wolf in the whole history of the world. The very idea is insane. . . ." ⁷

"One man," Nik wrote, "agreed to let me interview him only if we could meet in a secure setting in a city outside his home country where I would not be able to see his face or attempt to learn his name. I followed his instructions and traveled to the city he specified.

"Finding the apartment building he named, I climbed three sets of stairs, knocked on a door and walked into a small, unfurnished living room. I saw only the silhouette of a man who stood in total shadow behind a large potted plant in the far corner. A bare light bulb hung from the ceiling between us; its glare further obscured my vision.

"I could not really see the man at all, but I could hear him perfectly, so I had no problem taking notes. I listened to his story for about 6 hours, and quickly concluded that he was probably the toughest man I'd ever met in my life.

"He told me that during an invasion of his country some years before, he had led a squad of fifteen soldiers committed to repel foreign invaders. He calmly recounted that experience: 'I took great joy in the name of Allah when I could sneak up behind an enemy soldier at night, silently cut his throat, and allow his blood to wash over my hands as an offering to Almighty God.'

"His descriptions were so graphic, yet so matter-of-fact, that at one point I blurted out the question: 'How many people have you *killed*?'

"I stopped counting when the number reached 100,' he said. 'Those were people that I that I killed personally, not in battle.'

"As my mind shrank from that number, he went on to tell me that after a time he had begun to have a recurring dream in which he saw spots of blood on his hands. Over time, the spots of blood grew larger, and eventually, he dreamt that the blood was running down and dripping off his arms.

"He realized early on that he was imagining the blood of all those people he had killed. The dreams were so vivid, so disturbing, that he dreaded falling asleep at night. 'I really thought I was going insane,' he said, 'when I began to see the blood during my waking hours, and no amount of washing, or scrubbing with sand or pumice could get the blood off.

⁶ Nik Ripken, with Gregg Lewis, *The Insanity of God: A True Story of Faith Resurrected*, foreword by David Platt (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013).

⁷ Ripken, p. 140.

“Then one night the dream changed” he continued. “As I stood there helplessly watching the blood run off my arms, I saw a man standing before me, clothed in white. The man had a scarred head, scarred hands, a scarred side, and scarred feet. The scarred man said. ‘I am Jesus the Messiah and I can get the blood off, if you will find me and believe in me.’”

“The dream told the man to find Jesus. He had no idea how to do that, but he began the search. It took him over a year to locate a copy of the Scripture. It took even longer for him to understand what he was reading. From time to time, he would find people who could answer some of his questions. And, finally, this man told me that he had found and placed his faith in Jesus. After he invited Jesus into his heart, the man said, ‘I got the blood off. Jesus took that blood onto Himself’ . . . and the dreams immediately ended.

“At that point, the man didn’t have anybody to disciple him. In his country there was no church he could attend, no Bible study that he might join, so he kept reading and studying the Bible on his own, and he did everything the Holy Spirit told him to do.

“Eventually he began to smuggle Bibles, Christian materials, and even the *Jesus Film* over the mountains from another country into his own. He had done this for two years, when one day he rounded a bend in one of the high mountain passes and found himself face-to-face on a narrow trail with the squad of fifteen men that he had once led. They’d been on the lookout for their old commander ever since he’d disappeared and deserted them. They’d heard that he had become a traitor to Islam.

“Now that they had found him, they threw him to the ground and began to beat him, planning to beat him to death. But in that squad of Muslim militiamen was another secret believer in Jesus Christ. That man boldly spoke up and said, “Stop! Let’s think about this! If we kill our old commander here and now, we may never know who he’s working with, who the traitors are on this side of the border, or who they are on the other side.

“Let me take him down to the town at the bottom of the mountain. I can get him patched up and hold him prisoner. When he’s well enough to talk again, we can torture him until he tells us what we want to know.”

“His suggestion persuaded the other men, so they left their old commander with this secret Good Samaritan, who loaded him on a donkey, smuggled him out of the mountains, and set him free to resume the Gospel work he’d been doing.

“After listening for almost six hours, I expressed my respect and appreciation for this man’s willingness to talk with me. I told him how inspired I was by his testimony and praised God with him for all that the Lord had done in and through him; but I also probed into a gap I’d noticed in his story:

“You’ve told me that you’re married, that you have sons, that you’ve led your wife and children to Christ and that you’ve even baptized them. So I’m wondering where they fit into your ministry. You haven’t talked about that. How do they help you? What’s happening with your family?” I was not expecting what happened next.

“The man literally leapt out of the darkness and stood face to face with me. He clamped his scarred hands down tight on my shoulders, and his fierce dark eyes bored like lasers into mine. I remembered my earlier question about the number of men that he had killed.

“I was terrified as he shook me and demanded to know: **How can God ask it? Tell me! How can God ask it?!** I’ve given Him everything! My body has been broken. I’ve been jailed. I’ve been starved. I’ve been beaten. I’ve been left for dead! I’ve even been willing to die for Jesus; but do you know what I fear? When I go to bed at night, what keeps me awake, what terrifies me, is

the thought that God might ask of my wife and my children what I have already willingly given Him. **How can He ask it? Tell me! How could God ask that of my wife and children?’**

“I prayed that God would guide my words as I responded: ‘Brother, I personally cannot answer your question. But I myself have lost a son in this work, and I would ask you a question that I have had to ask myself: **“Is Jesus worth it? Is He worth your life? Is He worth the lives of your wife and your children?”**’”

“Then the toughest man I ever met began to sob. He wrapped his arms around me, buried his face in my shoulder and wept. When he finally stopped, he wiped away his tears, looked me in the eyes again, and declared, **‘Jesus is worth it. He’s worth my life, my wife’s life, and He’s worth the lives of my children! I’ve got to get them involved in what God is doing with me!’** And with that, the toughest man I ever met said goodbye, turned, and walked out of the room.”⁸

And now, with that story ringing in your ears and heart, hear these words from Nik: “None of the believers Ruth and I have encountered, who are victorious in their faith in the midst of persecution, have ever asked us to pray that their persecution would cease. Rather, they asked us to pray that they ‘would be faithful and obedient *through* their persecution and suffering.’ That is a radically different prayer.

“When we ask, ‘Why do 80% of the followers of Jesus who actively practice their faith in this world live in environments where persecution is the norm?’ the first and most basic answer is that **they have given their lives to Jesus**. The second contributing factor 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 simply must share the Good News of His sacrificial love and forgiveness with their families, their friends, and their neighbors; **and by doing that, these believers are choosing to be persecuted**.

“For most believers,” Nik wrote, **“persecution is completely avoidable**. If someone leaves Jesus alone, doesn’t seek Him or follow Him, then persecution will simply not happen. Even if someone becomes a follower of Jesus, persecution will not be likely if that faith is kept private and personal. If a person remains 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, tell people to leave Jesus alone. Second, tell them that if they do happen to find Him, then keep Him to yourself. Persecution stops immediately where there is no faith and where there is no witness. **The reason for persecution is that people keep finding Jesus—and then they refuse to keep Him to themselves**.

“Believers in persecution taught us another important truth,” Nik continued, “and that is that the freedom to believe and witness has nothing to do with the government or political system, or with the civil and political rights that might or might not be present in a particular place.

“They taught us that believers are just as free to share Jesus today in Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Communist countries as you and I are in America. It isn’t a matter of political freedom; it is simply a matter of *obedience*. While the price for obedience might be different in different places, it is *always* possible to obey Christ’s call to make disciples.

“I have to believe that Jesus would not have commissioned us to attempt a task that we were not able to accomplish, ‘sheep among wolves’ or not. So what believers in persecution are

⁸ Ripken, pp. 282-287.

reminding us is that we are all equally free and equally responsible to share Jesus in every corner of the globe. Whether or not we do so has nothing to do with *freedom*, but with *courage*.

“Not long ago,” Nik wrote, “Ruth and I were flown in as part of a response team that ministered to workers in a Muslim country after three missionary colleagues were martyred. While that was a grief-filled, emotion-laden, and spiritually-challenging time, what many of us who were there remember most from those days is *joy!*”

“Our martyred friends had partnered with our Master and had shouldered their own crosses for His sake and for the sake of witness. And in those days together, we who were left realized more fully that before we can grasp the full meaning of the Resurrection, we may first have to witness or to experience crucifixion. And if we choose to spend our lives so afraid of suffering, so averse to sacrifice, that we avoid taking risks that might lead to persecution or crucifixion, **we might also never discover the true wonder, joy and power of a Resurrection Faith.**”⁹

My friends, God is much at work in our broken and despairing world, drawing the lost to Himself as the firstfruits of the New Creation; and thousands upon thousands are coming to faith in Jesus, even if their faith comes at the cost of their lives. We who are not suffering for our faith are called to “*Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering*” (Hebrews 13:3).

As we come to the Table of the Lord, to which many around the world come literally at the risk of their lives, I invite you to join me in praying for these suffering friends whom we will never know until we join them around God’s Throne. Such prayer is more powerful than we imagine or can understand.

One approach to such prayer that I’m finding helpful is to pray for persecuted believers whenever I feel physical pain of any sort, however great or small, whether in the night or during the day. Whenever our relatively minor pains come, we may be confident that **sisters and brothers in Christ are suffering for their faith somewhere in our world at nearly that same moment. Our own pain becomes transformed as we let it become a call to intercession . . . intercession that changes things both in time and in eternity.** May we be found faithful!

⁹ Ripken, pp. 306-309.