

THE
INSANITY
of
GOD



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of
GOD

A TRUE STORY OF
FAITH RESURRECTED

NIK RIPKEN
with Gregg Lewis

B&H
PUBLISHING GROUP
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-4336-7308-5

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Published in association with
Yates & Yates, www.yates2.com.

Dewey Decimal Classification: TO COME
Subject Heading: TO COME

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 • 16 15 14 13

Be faithful, even to the point of death . . .

REVELATION 2:10



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Prologue . . . Ready or Not

First, a confession.

My real name is *not* Nik Ripken. My reason for writing under a pseudonym will become apparent soon enough. Rest assured, my story and the people who appear in it are very real. Many of these people are, to this day, in real danger. It is *their* identities that I want to protect. For this story, I have changed my name and I have changed their names too.

This is my own, true account of a long and personal journey. I share this story not as a great heroic adventure; in fact, much of the time this pilgrimage has felt to me like an endless bumbling, stumbling, wandering, feeling-my-way-in-the-dark ordeal. This is a story with a clear beginning—and an uncertain ending. Or maybe it's better to say that this story starts with one beginning—and ends with another one.

When I first encountered God's grace as a young man, I received it eagerly. My trust in God was innocent and childlike. The story that I was told about God's love and about His gift of salvation took hold of my heart. When I read in the Bible that God loved the world, I understood that I was part of that world. When I was told about God's gift of salvation, I knew that I wanted that gift. When I heard

about God's desire to reach the entire world with His grace, I quickly saw that I had a personal responsibility to fulfill that mission. And when I opened the book of Acts and encountered God's desire to reach the nations, I concluded quite simply that God intended for me to play a part in that.

Early in my life, it was so matter of fact: *this is what God offers His people; this is what God intends for His people; this is what God expects of His people—and His people, obviously, will respond with obedience and trust.* I am not suggesting that I always got it right, because I did not. But, still, the way to be obedient and trusting seemed so clear. And the need to be obedient was beyond question.

I am not sure if I ever heard it said out loud, but I also picked up the idea that obedience to God's call would result in a life of safety and security. Obedience, it was implied, would lead to effective ministry and measurable results and even success. "The safest place to be," I was told more than once, "is right in the center of God's will." And that sounded both true and reassuring.

I admit, however, my surprise when, many years later, I found myself living a life that was neither safe nor secure. I was stunned when, despite what I considered to be a life of sacrificial obedience, I could point to very little in my ministry that was "effective." There were simply no results to measure. And *success* was a word that I would have never used to describe what I had done.

It might, in fact, be safe to be in the center of God's will—but we would be wise to stop and think about what it means to be safe. I felt that I had lived a life in response to the call of God. Instead of effective ministry, measurable results, and what might pass for success, I felt mostly loss and heartache and failure.

What kind of God would allow this to happen?

That question drove me to a place very close to despair. I was forced to question much of what I believed—much of what I had been taught. The spiritual struggle was intense. Despair was something that I had never known before.

I was familiar with discouragement. In fact, I had been told as a young believer that discouragement would probably surface in my life with Jesus from time to time. But this was something different—something that I had never faced before. And I discovered that I had no tools for dealing with it. Nothing in my background had equipped me to handle despair. I didn't even have a vocabulary to describe it. Like Job in the Old Testament, "I knew that my Redeemer lived"—but I couldn't figure out why He was being so painfully silent. I was desperate for answers, but my questions simply hung in the air.

Does God, in fact, promise His children safety?

Do things always work out for those who are obedient?

Does God really ask us to sacrifice—and to sacrifice everything?

What happens when our best intentions and most creative ideas are not enough?

Is God at work in the hard places? And does He expect us to join Him in those hard places?

Isn't it possible to love God and to pretty much keep living the life I already have?

What does it really mean for God to tell us that His ways are not our ways?

Would He really allow people who love Him dearly to fail? And, if so, is this a God who can use even holy failure for His purposes?

Clearly, I was in a crisis of faith. Eventually, I saw the choice that I held in my hands. Would I choose to trust this God who I could not control? Would I be willing to walk with this God whose ways are so different? Would I, once again, lean on this God who makes impossible demands and promises only His presence?

This is the story of my journey.

Please hear this well: I do not have answers to all of my questions.

In fact, I am still not exactly sure where this journey might lead. But I am certain that the questions are worth asking—and I am certain that God is a patient, though sometimes demanding, teacher.

I am not completely sure about the ending of the story. But the beginning, I believe, was a plane trip to hell . . .



Of course, I was unaware of our destination at the time. No one had written “Hell” on our official flight plan.

In fact, there was an awful lot I didn’t know when I walked out onto the tarmac and climbed aboard a twin-engine Red Cross plane at Nairobi’s Wilson Airport on a bright February morning in 1992. I had made my “reservations” all of ten minutes before when I had walked up to the Westerner wearing an official-looking Red Cross jumpsuit—I assumed he was the pilot—and asked, “Where are you going?”

He told me that he would be delivering medical supplies to Somaliland. I nodded at the small stack of boxes sitting beside the aircraft and asked, “Need some help?”

“Always glad for any assistance,” he replied. As we stowed the boxes into the cargo area in the back of the six-seat cabin, I introduced myself and explained why his flights in and out of Somalia interested me. I told him what I was hoping to do. Finally I asked, “So, could I hitch a ride with you?”

He shrugged and nodded a bit hesitantly: “I can take you in, no problem. I just can’t promise when we might be able to get you out.” His plans had to be tentative and flexible—dictated by weather conditions and the ongoing conflict in Somalia. “I might be able to get back in there next week,” he told me. “Or it could be two or three weeks, maybe even a month. Things get crazy sometimes. We don’t make definite plans.”

Descent into Hell

Our flight path that day took us away from the fertile green Nairobi hills described so idyllically in the novel *Out of Africa*, across the parched brown terrain of northeast Kenya, and then over the forbidding mountains and desolate desert of southern Ethiopia. We finally dropped out of the sky and descended into hell by way of a bombed-out, single-landing-strip airport on the dusty outskirts of a city called Hargeisa.

This was the regional capital of an area known in colonial days as British Somaliland. Just a few years earlier, the region had declared its independence and attempted to secede from the Somali Democratic Republic. That had prompted the embattled Somali president to order his air force to bomb the second-largest city of his own country into submission.

Within minutes of my arrival there, I was aware that I had never been, or even imagined, any place that felt as oppressed as this. Rough

patches on the recently repaired runway covered only the biggest cracks and craters.

Every man I saw working or walking around the airport carried an automatic weapon. Next to a nearby storage shed I saw women and children poking wearily through piles of refuse in search of food.

Inside the shed, which was covered by a bomb-damaged roof and enclosed on only three sides, two Somali guards napped atop stacked cases of hand grenades, AK-47s, rocket grenades, land mines and assorted other ordinance and ammunition. That one cache of weaponry—probably sixty feet wide, fifteen feet deep and piled ten feet high—looked to my untrained eyes to hold enough firepower to overthrow a good-sized developing country. And perhaps it would, one day, do just that.

Once arrangements were made for a private car to “taxi” me into Hargeisa, I thanked the Red Cross crew for the lift. The pilot reminded me that it might be anywhere from a week to a month before he returned. He said that he would try to get word to the airport before he did.



I couldn't begin to comprehend the devastation that I encountered traveling from the airport into the city that day. What should have been a quick, five-kilometer jaunt turned into a long and disturbing drive through utter destruction. If I had ever needed a visual image to illustrate the term *war torn*, that picture popped up everywhere I looked. The few individuals I spotted on the streets seemed to be wandering more than walking. They were people who seemed to be going through the motions of life with little hope, uncertain purpose and no real destination. My driver told me that seventy thousand people still called this tortured city home. I also learned that, in all of Hargeisa, only seven houses still had intact roofs.

The worst of the fighting in this Somaliland region of the country had ended many months earlier. Once the bombing runs had halted,

a relentless follow-up mortar and rocket-grenade assault on the city began. With that punishment inflicted, the loyal government troops had turned their attention southward again to continue their battle with the rebel clans' militias for control of Mogadishu and the rest of the country.

The southern clans' insurrection eventually succeeded and the long-time dictator fled into exile. Soon the rebel coalition fell apart and former allies turned their violence against each other to determine which factions might be strong enough to seize ultimate control and govern the country.

The worst of the warfare may have moved elsewhere. But the death and destruction wrought for years on Hargeisa remained.

As my driver carefully picked his way, detouring around rubble from collapsed buildings and dodging bomb-craters in the road, I was told that the local people were still finding as many as fifty land mines a day. Many of the explosives were discovered only when stepped on and triggered accidentally by animals or playing children.

This was Somalia in early 1992—a land tormented by a deadly and unprecedented drought. Even worse, this horrific natural disaster had come hard on the heels of a brutal civil war as violent and inhumane as any conflict in human history. Yet, tragically, there would still be many more months and countless more deaths before this crippled country's full measure of misery would finally register on the radar screen of world awareness and shock the international community into responding.



I didn't know a soul in Somalia the day I landed in Hargeisa. An acquaintance who had worked in the country before the civil war somehow made contact on my behalf with a friend of his—a young European man currently working with a German nurse and a Dutch woman who had run an orphanage in Hargeisa for years. Those were the only contacts I had in the entire city. Fortunately, my driver *just*

happened to know where to find the westerners who ran the orphanage. They graciously invited me to make their “home” my base of operations for as long as I was in Somaliland.

The three of them lived very simply in the undamaged rooms of an empty shell of a rented house a few blocks from the orphanage that housed about thirty children whom they cared for with the help of a few Somali staff. With no electricity, no running water, and no western furniture in their home, my hosts used a small charcoal stove to prepare a supper consisting of chewy bits of goat simmered in broth and served with potatoes and boiled greens. We sat on the floor to share my first meal in Somalia, and we remained in that same position for a long after-dinner conversation.

As they told me about their challenges at the orphanage and talked about the children that they worked with, I was moved by their passion and compassion—not just for the girls and boys in their care, but for all the desperate people of Somalia, old or young, who had suffered so much for so long.

Naturally, my hosts wanted to know about me, especially why I had come to Hargeisa and what I hoped to accomplish. I told them about Ruth and my boys back in Nairobi and then shared some of my personal background: growing up on a farm in middle America, being the second in my family to get a college education, serving as a pastor at a couple of small churches back home, coming to Africa seven years before and working until recently in two different African countries, planting and growing churches.

I saw concern as well as interest on the faces of my listeners. I quickly let them know that I understood that I would never be able to do in Somalia the kind of work that I had done previously in Malawi and South Africa. Strict regulations had made it extremely difficult for westerners with any kind of religious affiliation to live or even gain entry into the country. Now, in the wake of the recent civil war, it had become virtually impossible.

According to my research, the best estimates indicated that in the

entire nation of Somalia (with a population of seven million people) there were only enough followers of Jesus to perhaps fill the pews of one small country church like we had back home in Kentucky. Of course, there was not a single church or enough believers concentrated in one area of Somalia to form even a small house-church congregation.

In light of that, I assured my hosts that Ruth and I were representing several different secular organizations that were interested in providing much-needed relief work in Somalia. Naturally, as believers ourselves, we hoped that our humanitarian relief efforts might demonstrate the love of God as we tried to be obedient to Jesus' teaching that His followers should seek out "the least of these." We wanted to obey His call to give water to the thirsty and food to the hungry, to clothe the naked, to provide shelter for the homeless and lost, to care for the sick, to visit those who had lost their freedom. Like the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable, we wanted to bind up the wounds and generously provide for the needs of any one of our *neighbors* in need of help.

Even at this early stage, we were well aware that the "forms" of Christianity such as buildings, ordained clergy, and seminaries were not transferable into hostile environments such as Somalia. Words like *church*, *missionary*, and *Christian* were just a few of the words that would harm witness and hinder work within an environment such as this.

If my three dinner partners had written me off as a naïve American, they would have been right. But they listened graciously and assured me that once I began scouting around Hargeisa, I would have no trouble at all finding a multitude of *neighbors* with more needs than I could even imagine.



Later that night, lying on top of a sleeping bag spread out on a concrete floor, I mentally reviewed all that I had seen and heard and

learned in just a few hours. I was already experiencing sensory overload. And I was certain that I had only started to scratch the surface.

In that moment, the prayer that I prayed was mostly complaint: *“Lord God, why me? Why here?”* Just in case God had forgotten, I pointed out that nothing in my upbringing, my education, or my professional experience had equipped me to live or work in a place like Somalia. My prayer that night was filled with demands: *“What in the world do you expect me to do here, Lord? There are no churches and hardly any Somali believers. There are no pastors, no deacons, no elders, no Sunday schools, and no Bible studies. There is nothing here that I recognize! There is nothing that I know how to do here! I am hopelessly lost. I am all alone behind enemy lines. Please, Jesus, get me out of here!”*

Forget the months of planning and preparation that had preceded this trip! If there had been a way to contact my Red Cross pilot and persuade him to fly back the next day, I was ready to climb on the plane and never return to Somalia.



My visit to the orphanage the next day lifted my spirits, despite the fact that getting there was another harrowing adventure. It was difficult and dangerous for anyone to move around Hargeisa. What should have been an eight-block walk that took a few minutes wasn't that simple. And it certainly wasn't safe. I followed my hosts' lead as we trod carefully down deserted alleys and detoured completely around other blocks where they knew the streets had been mined and not yet cleared. By the time we reached our destination, I felt as if I had walked to the end of the world.

The orphanage, however, felt like an oasis of joy and hope in that vast desert of despair. The kids crowded into that little compound were some of the best-fed Somali children I would ever see.

The home itself showed the Arab architectural influence common to many cities in the Horn of Africa—a single-story, flat-roofed

structure, its walls constructed of sunbaked bricks covered in plaster and whitewashed inside and out. Sunlight shone in through bar-covered window openings, none of which was screened or glassed. The outer walls of the house were pocked with bullet holes. At night the children slept wall-to-wall on woven mats they rolled out over cement floors. Like the rest of Hargeisa's residents, the residents of the orphanage lived without electricity—except when petrol could be found for a small generator to power a handful of lights.

Without running water, orphanage workers had to search each day for new sources of water that they could afford to purchase. The only toilets consisted of a simple hole in the floor or ground over dug-out latrine pits.

Not one time in my visit that day (nor in any other visit to the orphanage) did I see a child set foot outside the walls of the orphanage. Their entire world had been reduced to that one small compound consisting of the interior of that house and its tiny courtyard. There was a world without toys. There were few books, no modern appliances, and no pieces of furniture. Yet, despite such primitive conditions, the contrast between inside and outside could not have been greater. Beyond those walls I had witnessed the hideous face of evil and its crushing impact on the country. Within the shelter of that home, however, I discovered a surprisingly secure and happy refuge where children smiled and laughed and played.



My first actual attempt at “scouting” came later that day. It was nothing more than a simple trek with the orphanage ladies on their daily walk to the city’s open-air market to see what food might be available for the children’s supper. I asked if I could tag along. I figured that, if my organization was going to provide the orphanage with food and other relief assistance, I needed to have some firsthand knowledge about what was currently available from local sources.

The short answer to that question was: *Not much!*

The only meat for sale was goat or camel. And there was no sure way to tell whether the meat had been intentionally slaughtered to be sold fresh at market that day, or if a local farmer had simply tried to make the best of a bad situation by carving up the carcass after one of the emaciated animals in his herd had dropped dead of thirst or disease—or maybe wandered accidentally into a minefield.

None of the meat for sale that day would come close to qualifying as “prime.” But I had seen my share of animals slaughtered back home on the farm, so I wasn’t too squeamish about the skinned and dressed sides and quarters of raw meat hanging from the top of the butchers’ stalls. Once the ladies made their choice and pointed to what looked like a whole goat, I did have to wince and swallow hard when the butcher gave the carcass a good whack with the flat side of his machete blade to chase a cloud of flies away before sawing off one scrawny leg-of-goat.

The orphanage children would each get barely one bite of meat from that single goat leg. But there might be enough to flavor a small sack of scrawny potatoes that another vendor had for sale. Along with some onions and two under-sized, shriveled heads of cabbage, those were the *groceries* we bought—simply because that was all anybody had for sale.

Later, I was able to explore some other parts of the city. What struck me most was not what I saw—but what I did not see. For example, nowhere in the city of seventy thousand people did I find a single functioning school. Nor did I find any hospital seeking to provide care for the many people dying of disease and starvation.

Everywhere my friends took me, their tour-guide spiel sounded sadly the same: “A school used to be here, that building over there used to be a hospital, this was where the police station was, a store used to be here, a sports field used to be there.”

As I listened to this repeated refrain, I asked myself, *In a place where so many of the things basic to life have to be spoken of in the past tense, is there any hope to turn things around and get to the future tense?*