



Persecution: Normal and Expected

by Dr. Nik Ripken

"If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also..."

John 15:20

They admitted to being confused. They were pastors and lay leaders who had endured decades of persecution within the now failing U.S.S.R. They had agreed to share their personal, family, and church stories with the broader Christian community. They had agreed to be interviewed, hoping to help churches, sending bodies, and missionaries in the West develop a more biblical missiology of suffering for themselves. These pastors and lay leaders were personally and intimately conversant with persecution, suffering, and martyrdom.

The confusion surfaced near the end of a series of interviews. Life histories had been shared. Stories of persecution had been recited and documented. Tears had been shed. Events had been dissected. And, admittedly, the testimonies were compelling. It seemed to the interviewer that this was the stuff of Scripture; it seemed that he was hearing Bible stories come to life in his own time.

And that's when the moment of confusion came. It was the interviewer who asked the question. It wasn't a very professional question – and it wasn't well-planned. But he was compelled to ask. He simply couldn't help himself. After hearing story after gripping story, he virtually accosted this group of pastors and lay leaders: "Why have you cheated us in the West?" he demanded. "Why haven't you written these stories down? Where are the books that chronicle your faith and persecution? These stories are worthy of a movie; these are Bible stories come to life! Why have you not recorded these events? Why have you not shared these lessons learned? Why have you cheated us in the West?"

His outburst was greeted with confused silence. The pastors and lay leaders were dumbfounded. Most of the people there simply ignored the embarrassing questions – and the harshness of the challenge. There was only silence.

But, finally, one brother stood up, took the interviewer by the arm, and drew him to the end of the large room. There they

stood by the eastern window of the dwelling. Looking out at the horizon, the man spoke calmly to the interviewer. "Sir," he said, "when your sons were growing up, how many mornings did you take them to the window of your house and say to them, 'Look, boys, the sun is coming up in the East this morning!'"

The interviewer found the question silly. "Well, I never once did that," he answered. "Had I done that, my sons would have thought that I had lost my mind – because the sun always comes up in the East!"

Gently, the wise brother made his point. "Sir," he said, "That is why we talk little of our persecution and suffering. That is why we have not written our stories down. And that is why we have not made a movie. Our persecution is always with us. It simply comes as we walk with Jesus. It is like the sun coming up in the East."

"Besides," he continued, "when did you Christians in the West stop reading the Bible? Our stories have already been told. God has already told all of us what we need to know about persecution and suffering."

To say that the interviewer was deeply humbled belabors the obvious. But the truth had found a way into his heart. And he was changed that day.

What kind of a person sees persecution as biblical, normal, expected, and hardly worth mentioning? Clearly, a person who is steeped in the story of Scripture and well-acquainted with God. We would be wise to listen and learn the lessons...

First, persecution is normal for those who follow Jesus

Scripture makes the point from beginning to end: Persecution is the norm for followers of the one true God. It is, quite simply, like the sun coming up in the East. Persecution in itself is neither good nor bad; it just is. Certainly, Christians are not to seek persecution. But, at the same time, Christians need not give in to a crippling fear. Persecutors intend for persecution to punish, to intimidate, and (ultimately) to silence God's people. But God Himself can use persecution in other ways. His highest purpose in persecution is to call His people closer to Himself, to refocus their attention to the suffering of

their Lord. When followers of Christ suffer willingly for their Savior, it gives their faith value. That kind of suffering also increases witness. Believers experiencing persecution are invited to place their focus on their Lord and on their own witness and obedience.

Second, the primary cause of persecution is people coming to Jesus

That may sound strange, but consider this simple truth: When people come to Jesus, persecution results. And the only way to stop persecution is to keep people from coming to Jesus. Conversion and suffering for the faith are simply two sides of the same coin. Most Christians in the West hold to a missiology of suffering that is, at the very least, biblically inconsistent. Most Christians in the West see persecution as “bad,” as “a punishment,” and as “something to be avoided at all cost.” Western Christians facing persecution would typically ask this question: “What did we do to deserve this?” And that question really means: “What did we do wrong?” But believers who are more at home in the world of persecution would see things differently. They might say, “We are being persecuted because we did what was right!” What a different perspective!

The Western church has been led by a host of well meaning proclaimers and organizations asking that Christians pray for brothers and sisters who are experiencing persecution. That is biblically right and godly. Yet those who pray typically ask for God to stop the persecution.

Is that really what we want to pray? Is that really what we want to pray when the only way to stop persecution is to keep people from coming to Jesus?

Those who see persecution like the “sun coming up in the East” seldom ask others to pray for their suffering to end. Rather, they ask that others pray that they might remain obedient in the midst of their persecution. They ask that others might pray that they might be bold in their witness. They ask that others might pray that God would use their suffering to bring others to Him. But they do not ask that others pray for their persecution to end. Amazingly, they understand that there is no resurrection without a crucifixion. And while they never seek to suffer, they find joy in being allowed to suffer for and with Jesus. In their suffering, they are privileged to identify with their risen Lord.

Third, even when missionaries do everything right, the end result of bold and culturally astute witness will be the persecution, suffering, and even the martyrdom of others

That’s the end result of “the mission enterprise.” One of Satan’s most powerful weapons is attacking the fruit of a believer’s witness. Consider the scenario: The faith has been shared and received. A new disciple has come into the family. The one who has shared the Good News feels responsible. And Satan can use that good feeling of responsibility for his purposes. The words that Satan whispers are devastating: “You were faithful in your witness. Now, look, someone is being hurt because of what you did! Your beloved disciple is now being persecuted! And it’s all because of what you did. Maybe it would have been better if this one had never come to Christ.”

Subconsciously, it is easy to accept those words. It’s easy to believe that the persecution is your fault. Trying to assuage that terrible guilt, Western workers often move into “rescue mode.” The plan is simple: “Perhaps we should extract this new disciple and keep him safe!” Tragically, in the process, God’s call to church planting gets lost. And, even more dangerous, the rescuers come to believe that “safety” is something that they can both guarantee and provide.

God’s story speaks to the situation. What do we do when our Joseph is wrongly accused and thrown into Pharaoh’s prison? Practically speaking, what do we do when that happens today? We write emails. We distribute contact information for governments and United Nations officials. We fill inboxes and voicemails with demands that “our” Joseph be freed. We righteously claim that his rights have been violated. We point out that he has committed no crime. And we say that we will settle for nothing less than his release. We threaten sanctions.

And that’s all understandable...

But what if God Himself has determined that He needs Joseph in jail for a season? Or, at the very least, what if God determines that He will use this time of imprisonment for some special purpose? What if we spring Joseph too soon – before he has the opportunity to interpret Pharaoh’s dream? What if we “rescue” Joseph – only to discover that we have been actually working against the purposes of God? Of course, we dare not be careless here: no believer has the right to be silent when another believer is suffering! The church in the West has no right to ignore the suffering of brothers and sisters around the globe. But even so, there is a God-given wisdom that will lead God’s people to understand that there are times to allow

Joseph to remain imprisoned for the sake of God and His kingdom. And there is a God-given wisdom that will lead God's people to understand exactly when those times are.

The interviews had gone on for some time. Story after story had been shared. And that's when the interviewer accosted this group of pastors and lay leaders: "Why have you cheated us in the West?" he demanded. "Why haven't you written these stories down? Where are the books that chronicle your faith and persecution? Why have you cheated us in the West?"

"Sir," the wise brother said, "There is a reason why we talk little of our persecution and suffering. Our persecution is always with us. It simply comes as we walk with Jesus. It is like the sun coming up in the East."

For 80% of the Christian family in our world today, persecution remains an event as common as the sun coming up in the East. Surely, persecution is not ever to be sought. And it is not to be fearfully avoided. But when it comes, each follower of Christ is invited to embrace it, to see it as normal and expected, and to pray that God might somehow use it for His purposes.

Dr. Nik Ripken © July 29, 2008