



Recapturing a Missiology of Suffering

by Dr. Nik Ripken

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

Genesis 50:20 (NIV)

The call of God compels us to articulate and practice a biblical missiology – a missiology grounded in the Word of God and informed by the experience of God’s people through the ages – a missiology that transcends culture and reflects the very heart of God. Our common assumption is that our methodology and practice are sound and solid; we normally take that for granted. But wisdom demands that we listen to the voices of brothers and sisters in Christ whose experience is different from our own. We have much to learn and – in some cases – much to unlearn about what it means to live as God’s people on mission.

The Testimony of Believers Living in Persecution

The testimony of believers living in the midst of persecution challenges the church in the West, and its missionaries, to recapture a biblical missiology – a missiology that is mature enough to embrace suffering, persecution, and even martyrdom. Believers in settings of persecution, through numerous interviews, suggest that the church in the West has lost its missiological edge and that it has grown soft in the face of overt persecution. The story told by persecuted believers calls to mind God’s people of old. The priests of the Old Testament could rightly interpret the Ten Commandments and parse the grammatical nuances of the law code. But the work of the priests was much broader and richer than merely that. These ancient carriers of God’s Word could also place these commandments upon their shoulders and carry them into battle, through swollen rivers, across deserts, and over mountains. These messengers of God were courageous carriers of the Word, calloused of feet and hand, seasoned mentally and spiritually. These priests knew the Word and they lived the Word. And they rightly understood that a life lived in the presence of God would

be framed by suffering and persecution. In fact, for these ancient heroes of the faith, that is what it meant to share in the Kingdom of God.

Can the same be said of us? We are the modern carriers of this same Word. Do we understand the central place of suffering and persecution in the faith we claim? Or, in light of the freedom that has shaped us, have we written those troubling truths out of the story? Are suffering and persecution essential parts of the story – or are they relics from another time and place? Modern Western believers may revolt at the thought – but unless we find our identity as God’s people in the midst of suffering and persecution, we will sadly discover that we have no identity.

In the former Soviet Union, believers understood that their heritage was one of suffering and persecution. To this day, believers growing out of that heritage claim that persecution is “normal,” that it is as normal as the “sun coming up in the east.” For decades, believers in the former U.S.S.R. and in neighboring China have lived victoriously in the midst of persecution. They have done this by incarnating a genealogy of faith that models from one generation to the next how a follower of Christ lives and how a follower of Christ dies. When these believers are asked, “Where did you learn to live like this? Where did you learn to die like this?” they answer, “I learned this from my mother and my father. I learned this from my grandfather and grandmother.” Though enduring and excelling in the midst of persecution is never easy, these modern-day giants of the faith teach us through their flesh and souls that following Jesus involves a cross as well as a crown.

This is a seminal issue for first generation believers who are emerging into faith from within Islam. Who is able to teach these new MBBs how to live in Christ? Who will teach these new MBBs how to die in Christ? These are especially critical questions in light of the fact that it is often their biological parents and grandparents who lead in their persecution. It is often immediate family members who beat the new MBBs, place them under house arrest, disinherit them, and then arrange marriages for their believing daughters to Muslim men thirty years their senior. It is often immediate family members who turn the new believers over to the religious authorities. Who

will teach these new believers how to live in Christ – and, perhaps, even to die in Him?

This will never happen without a genealogy of faith. But a genealogy of faith will likely not be found in the immediate family. If it is to be found at all, it will originate from the very people who have shared with these new believers the Gospel story. This precious responsibility falls on the shoulders of missionaries from outside the culture. They will be the ones to model for MBBs a genealogy of faith. This genealogy of faith will include at least two elements. First, the missionary will model a genealogy of faith that is grounded in the story of God's people through the ages. The missionary will build for these new believers, in literate and oral forms, a biblical genealogy of faith that spans no less than the sixty-six books of the Bible, Genesis to Revelation. Second, the missionary will incarnate a living example of a genealogy of faith – one that both asks and answers this crucial question: "Do you want to know how to live and die in Christ? Then watch my life as I live it out in your midst." Such was the admonition of the Apostle Paul to believers in the early church. And God's people on mission, even today, will find the courage to say the very same thing.

Of course, making such a claim is both difficult and humbling. Entering into suffering is unspeakably painful. But even more terrifying is watching "our Joseph" begin to experience his or her own persecution. That's where most of us want to draw the line. How exactly do we react today when "our Joseph" is thrown into Pharaoh's prison unjustly? What do we do when our beloved "Joseph" begins to suffer for the faith? Emails fly as we demand the immediate release of "our Joseph" who has been wrongly accused and imprisoned. We petition governments to intercede, and we bring political and military might to bear on the situation. We threaten the persecutors. We call the church to pray that the persecution might end. Many Western-based and well meaning organizations have developed a protocol for responding to events of persecution, often adopting a four-fold agenda that aims to:

- 1 Stop the persecution,
- 2 Punish the persecutors,
- 3 Promote western forms of government and democracy, and
- 4 Raise funds that will aid in the rescuing of believers from persecution.

Much to our amazement, a truly biblical missiology would likely respond in a different way. How might we develop

a spiritual, emotional, and physical toughness that, when Pharaoh throws "our Joseph" into prison unjustly, we allow him or her to stay in jail? Where does such strength and spiritual insight come? And, then, do we dare consider this thought: to rescue Joseph prematurely from prison, before he has the opportunity to interpret Pharaoh's dream, would lead to the starvation and destruction of both Egypt and Israel, the destruction of both persecutor and persecuted. How do we know when it is within God's will for Joseph to remain in jail for a season?

For most of us, the answer is easy. We can allow that as long as it is someone else's Joseph. But when it is "our Joseph" undergoing persecution, there erupts an overwhelming desire to rescue this dear brother or sister from the prisons and crosses that necessarily accompany faith in the Messiah.

Rescuing brothers and sisters from persecution and planting churches may not be compatible.

Believers living in the midst of persecution call us to intervention and prayer. They call Western Christians who are not themselves in the midst of overt suffering to pray – to pray not that persecution for other believers might end, but that the persecuted would be obedient in the midst of their suffering. Obedient to what? Obedient to endure and to share, especially with their persecutors, the forgiveness and love that is found through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such a missiology does not quantify persecution as either good or bad. Persecution just "is." Whether persecution is a curse or a blessing depends ultimately on how believers respond to their suffering. If believers run in fear from persecution, then the faith community has a serious problem to confront. Conversely, if a believer enjoys persecution and seeks it out, then the faith community is dealing with someone with serious psychological sickness.

A biblical missiology reminds us that believers should not fear the persecution that is inherent in following Christ, engaging in compulsive fleeing. But, at the same time, believers should not seek out persecution when God has determined that believers are allowed to live in a season of grace.

We can learn much from the response of MBBs to this telling question: "What do you learn from Western missionaries?" The initial answers are affirming and kind. MBBs express gratitude for the gospel that missionaries have sacrificially carried to them. They marvel at the selflessness of missionaries as they meet human needs at great cost, both financially and personally. MBBs are typically in awe that Western missionary families have given up living in the rich West for the sake of the poor and lost among the Nations. MBBs have many kind things to say about Western workers. But eventually, other answers₂

are offered. When confidences are won, and candidness appears, MBBs often share insights that are more difficult to hear and accept. "What do we learn from missionaries?" they often repeat back to us? "Missionaries teach us to be afraid." Modeling fear in the face of suffering is a missiological error. Sadly, it is more than that. It is, quite simply, sin.

What are Western missionaries afraid of? According to these gracious MBBs, missionaries fear that their platform might be compromised, that they might be kicked out of a country, that they might lose their work permit or visa. Western missionaries fear that their children might have to move with them to another country, that they might be uprooted from their schools and friends. Western missionaries dread the thought of having to learn another language. Most of all, missionaries fear that the fruit of their ministry will be targeted; that new believers might be persecuted, fired from their jobs, divorced from their families, and beaten. Western missionaries fear most that "our Joseph" will go to jail or, worse, be martyred because of the faith that has been born because of the missionaries' witness. Satan plays on this fear as missionaries are accused by the secular media or even other mission partners of "getting this person harmed or killed". This fear tends to make missionaries timid in their witness. When faith does break out, often the Western missionaries will extract "their believer" to another country of perceived safety, preferably in the West. Therefore, church planting is compromised. In fact, if this pattern is followed, the planting of a church will likely never happen.

Apparently, as far as we know, Jesus never extracted one follower to another country. He never guaranteed His followers personal safety – and consistently called for a clear witness to family, culture, and country – even when such a witness was certain to carry a high price. Jesus warned his followers that persecution was simply a part of following Him. He told His followers to prepare for its coming. Jesus said in Matthew 10:23, "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes." (NIV)

Believers living in settings of persecution offer another insightful piece of counsel. Missionaries most often, they point out, face persecution as a result of discipling, baptizing, and gathering MBBs together within the missionaries' living environment. The regular meeting of MBBs in a missionary's home, or singling out MBBs and worshipping with them in their location, frequently leads to persecution. And, tragically, this is persecution for reasons other than for who Jesus is. Persecution that results from a personal relationship with a Western missionary – or persecution that grows out of employment, education, or worship – is different from persecution for who Jesus is.

MBBs suggest, creatively, that missionaries were called by God to expend their lives among those who remain in lostness. MBBs suggest, conversely, that most missionaries get into trouble, not because they are leading lost people to Jesus, but because they are spending the bulk of their time among those already added to the kingdom of God.

MBBs ask us to be a model for them. They want us to model how to witness to the landlord, the neighboring family, the corrupt policeman, and the suspicious immigration officer. They desire to watch our marriages and child rearing to see how families can reach families. They long to see us witnessing in culturally appropriate ways to the people we encounter through everyday living.

This is not to be seen as a blanket indictment of the Western worker. We have been persecuted, forcibly expelled from the people we love, refused visas, jailed, and martyred. Yet the words of our brothers and sisters who live in persecution carry the weight of truth. Often persecution is visited upon the MBB because of the Christian agency employing him. The very lives of MBBs are jeopardized by sharing in worship with foreigners, or accepting Bibles and other discipleship materials too bulky to hide. In many venues, some who are persecuted for possessing Christian literature cannot even read what they have been handed. Baptism for MBBs is a real testament of faith. Often persecution soars for the MBB at the time of his or her baptism. Yet the risk intensifies when the baptism is at the hands of foreigners or witnessed by outsiders. The accusation that Christianity is a foreign religion, just for westerners, is heightened even more when a Western face leads in the pastoral duties among those already reborn into the kingdom of God.

MBBs ask us to consider taking most of our risks among those who are still lost rather than taking most of our risks among those already saved.

Believers living in persecution point to another telling observation in regard to the ministry of Jesus. Consider the environment in which Jesus fermented the coming Pentecost of Acts 2. His country was occupied by a foreign army and controlled by a severe dictatorship. Such was the brutality of the day that Herod slaughtered hundreds of innocent babies in response to the birth of the King of the Jews. The religious rulers of Jesus' day preferred to partner with the occupiers rather than lose their power, prestige, and authority to this new movement. Early in His ministry, these religious leaders sought to kill Jesus. He lived and ministered in an environment where the potential for persecution was endemic.

Yet for the entire three years of Jesus' ministry, and in spite of His overt challenges to the powers of His day, how many of His followers were beaten, tortured, imprisoned, and killed? Not a single one! Jesus was culturally astute

and bold in His witness. Framing the gospel by both words and deeds, He created a safe place for seekers and new followers to hear, understand, and believe within their social units. Prior to Pentecost, severe persecution was not visited upon those seeking and following Jesus. After Pentecost, believers were in their thousands and better equipped to both endure and excel through their sufferings for Christ.

Learning from the Persecutors

What is the goal of the persecutors? Perhaps a better way to ask this question is to ask, “What is the goal of Satan?” Many suggest that the goal of Satan is to have us kicked out of our homes, to take away our jobs, and to destroy our marriages. Evil itself, we are lead to believe, prefers to beat, torture, imprison, and even kill followers of Jesus. Thus the reports that stir our hearts, move us emotionally, empty our pocketbooks, and motivate us into a rescuing mode highlight the loss of liberty, the bruising of the body, and the taking of life.

But if persecution, suffering, and martyrdom are defined in this way, then countries such as Saudi Arabia and Somalia would not even be included in a list of the world top’s persecutors. Why not? By most accepted definitions, a country has to have a significant number of believers in order to persecute them. Saudi Arabia is so closed that it refuses to allow the gospel a hearing at all. Therefore, the number of true believers to persecute is miniscule. For the same reason, Somalia has been removed from most of the lists denoting the top countries that persecute believers in Jesus. This is due to the simple act that radicals in that country have either forced most MBBs out of their land or they have killed them. Has persecution ceased in Somalia because there are no Christians left to persecute? If persecution is to be measured only in terms of overt acts, what does one call countries, cultures, and people groups that are so resistant that they allow no hearing of the gospel, no understanding, no accepting, and no gathering together?

But persecution does not always take that form. Believers living in the midst of persecution suggest strongly that the goal of Satan is not to beat, torture, or kill believers. The goal of Satan and his persecutors, suffering believers remind us, is to silence believers, to make believers lose (or give up) their voice, and to diminish witness. Also, the persecutors strive to silence witness as covertly as possible. The most successful persecution happens when an immediate family member, a boss, a spouse, or the culture in general, pressures the convert into remaining quiet, keeping faith “personal.” The persecutors want to relegate faith to the environs of the Western world. Or they desire that faith be practiced only within the walls of a few church buildings

that are closely monitored by the state or the local religious authorities.

Persecution, at its evil heart and essence, denies others access to Jesus.

Believers living in the midst of persecution suggest that, when they are rejected by their families, thrown into prison, beaten, and killed for their faith, then that is precisely the time for the global church to rejoice and give God praise. Why would they make such an insane suggestion? It is these overt acts of persecution that reveal the persecutors’ abject failure to silence witness, diminish faith, or slow Pentecost from arriving once more in the midst of a resistant culture. Overt persecution is a sign of the failure of the persecutors. Failure to keep believers quiet leads to overt persecution – so overt persecution is an indication that believers have refused to be quiet! Overt persecution authenticates the faith within resistant cultures. Overt persecution gives faith value in the eyes of those who watch believers and marvel at their willingness to suffer and die in Jesus’ name. What that means is that a radically different understanding of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom must be considered. In this light, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Somalia can be listed at the very pinnacle of those who persecute the faith and the faithful because, at their core, they seek to deny people access to the eternal life that is found only in Jesus. The implication for the Western church and her missionaries is huge. Every day, every follower of Jesus decides whether to side with the persecutors or the persecuted. Believers side with the persecutors when they withhold their witness – and they side with the persecuted when they are open in sharing their faith. If persecution is defined by beatings, imprisonments, and martyrs alone, then the Western church is correct to pray “for” the persecuted. Persecution is about “those poor people and the terrible things happening to them.” But if persecution is defined in terms of denying others access to Jesus, then perhaps praying “with” the persecuted will have a more intimate feel as we side with persecuted brothers and sisters by choosing to give our witness boldly.

What, Then, Are We to Do?

What might a truly biblical missiology look like? What might we choose to learn – and unlearn – in light of this worldwide witness? And how might we live in response?

We begin with this startling word: the number one cause of persecution is people giving their lives to Jesus. We can reduce persecution, most easily, by reducing the number of those who come to salvation! Most Christians in the West have been taught to pray for persecution to end, to pray that suffering would cease, and to pray

that martyrs would be only an historical reference. The only possible way for those things to happen is to stop people from accepting Jesus. The major cause of persecution is people giving their lives to Christ and, then, refusing to deny others access to the very same Savior. Salvation and witness inevitably result in persecution for Christian believers.

Persecution, quite simply, is normal for Christians. Both the witness of Scripture and the testimony of history bear this out. How, then, are Western missionaries to react? Consider these simple words of counsel:

Accept the hard truth that persecution is normal and prepare yourself and others for that reality.

Become culturally astute. Strive to create a safe place and space of time for lost people to hear, understand, believe, and experience Pentecost before being visited by severe persecution.

Lose your fear and claim your freedom to be a culturally wise and bold witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Losing fear and claiming freedom have little to do with political environment. Followers of Christ are as free to share their faith in Afghanistan as they are in the United States or Europe. The issue is not whether we are free to share; the issue is whether we are willing to suffer the consequences of expressing our faith. We are all free – but not all of us are willing to bear the consequences of a free and bold witness.

Be tough – emotionally, spiritually, and physically – for you will be the cause of an increasing amount of persecution as thousands of lost people hear and believe your witness. Persecution and response to the gospel are the two sides of the same coin. Understand that bold witness will necessarily result in persecution – not because you are unwise in your practices, but simply because Satan detests faith and desires that no one become a child of God.

Do not run from persecution – and do not seek it.

Decide not to extract a believer. Decide not to rescue others from sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

And never regret that others joyously received your witness, even if the cost of their faith carries the high cost of persecution. Remember that the resurrection came through crucifixion.

Never lessen the price paid by believers in persecution. No matter how the persecution event is publicized, no matter what victory might be won, no matter the glorious finale – persecution is not fun and it is not to be sought. It is blood, sweat, and tears. It is physical and psychological abuse. It is isolation and years of separation. It is growing up as a child with a father in prison. It is raising children without a mate,

ostracized from the community. Never slight the price paid by believers in persecution and never become casual about the cost. Honor the suffering of brothers and sisters in Christ by telling the truth about the price they have paid.

Determine to live out your genealogy of faith, modeling for first generation, emerging believers, how a follower of Christ lives and dies. Have the courage to say, “Watch my life as it is lived out in your midst.” And then live a life that is worthy of being copied.

Through it all, become a risk taker among lost people so that they – every tongue and every tribe – might have opportunity to hear, understand, believe, and be gathered in the body of Christ.

Never forget that Jesus is worth it.

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