Thought Provoking Articles by Nik Ripken, on: 2017/2/13 15:15
Article by Nik Ripken
Guest Contributor

When I read the Gospels for the first time, the repetition confused me. Why revisit the same story four times? Yet it was in and through that repetition that I fell deeply in love with Jesus.

The Gospels invited me in, encouraging me to ask questions of God, to write myself into his story. They demanded an honesty and openness, with God and myself, unlike any I had experienced.

I even questioned the Creator himself. How could he do it? What kind of Father lets his Son be tortured, humiliated, and crucified? Perhaps what troubled me most was when the Son cried out to his Father, â€œMy God, my God, why have you forsaken me?â€ (Matthew 27:46). And what reply does the Son receive from his Father God? Nothing.

The Acceptable Silence

Bible scholars sometimes explain this â€œsilence from heavenâ€ as the Fatherâ€™s necessary reaction to the Son who had actually become sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). The spotless Lamb of God had become sin for those who betrayed and crucified him. He had become sin for you . . . for me.

This painful silence may also point to the Fatherâ€™s unspeakable pain at the suffering of his Beloved. In either case, it is a silence I can understand and accept.

There is a second kind of silence, however, that I cannot accept.

The Church the West Doesnâ€™t Know

For more than two decades, my wife and I have embraced a pilgrimage that has brought us face to face with many of the most severely persecuted Christians of our time. This phase of our ministry began in Somalia, on the east coast of central Africa, a nation that has been shredded by an ongoing civil war that began in 1991. Watching the nation devour itself has been bad enough; witnessing the persecution of Somali followers of Jesus has been unbearable.

The statistics still shock me. When we arrived in Somalia in the 1990s, we learned of approximately 150 followers of Jesus from Muslim backgrounds. When we were forced from that country some eight years later, only four believers were left alive.

Four.

My honesty with the God of the Bible haunted me. What does one do when all seems to be crucifixion, and nothing resembles resurrection? In the face of a death rate among Somali believers higher than 97 percent, I could neither say nor pray among the Somali people that â€œhe who is in you is greater than he who is in the worldâ€ (1 John 4:4).

The questions in my heart demanded expression. Is Jesus still trustworthy? Is he still Lord for the really tough places of the world, the modern-day Roman Empires defined by severe persecution? Or is Jesus limited to the dressed-up, buildin g-oriented, literate, theologically intolerant, and denominationally defined Western church?

My wife and I went on to spend many more years among believers in persecution, most of them gathered in house churches, behind the scenes, under the radar. We visited more than 72 countries and sat at the feet of more than 600 followers of Jesus who had lived â€” who do live â€” in settings of persecution, whether from communism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, or something else.

These modern-day giants of the Christian faith mentored us, taught us, and showed us the power of Jesus. They were men and women, young and old, literate and non-literate, rural and urban. Their names are rarely known outside their im
mediate communities. They don’t blog or tweet or post on Facebook. But they did teach my wife and me how to follow Jesus and make him known in environments of persecution. And because we begged them to, they showed us, not merely how to survive in seasons of extreme suffering, but how to thrive.

At a time when our world had been defined far too long by crucifixion, they showed us resurrection.

In the former Soviet Union, we interviewed two deacons who had been imprisoned for three years in a Siberian labor camp. They told us that one day some 240 pastors were brought into the camp, men who had refused to deny their faith.

These pastors were given the truly impossible job of plowing the frozen tundra outside the camp, using only sticks and broken tools. Each evening, as punishment for another day of inevitable failure, they were stripped to their underwear and doused with buckets of cold water. Within three months all had died of various diseases, each remaining â€œfaithful unto deathâ€• (Revelation 2:10).

This is not ancient history. This story, and a hundred more like it, have happened within my lifetime. Some are happening right now. Today.

Persecution Is for Losers

Approximately seventy percent of Christians who are practicing their faith live in environments of persecution. In the West, most believers find it shocking â€“ even unbelievable â€“ that followers of Jesus should face real persecution at all, anywhere. In stark contrast, more than 90% of Christians in the West will never share the good news of Jesus with another person. Not. Even. Once.

Somehow the â€œgospelâ€• we love has become so associated with health, wealth, and happiness that it leaves no room for persecution, at least, not for those whom God truly loves. If we think about persecution at all, we think its absence from our own lives is a sign of our special standing with God. No wonder we pray so little for our persecuted brothers and sisters. No wonder they hardly even cross our minds.

Rarely do sermons inform or inspire us about the suffering church. Seldom is a seminary course meant to prepare its students for suffering and persecution. We pray more for our military than we do for the suffering church. Even though Jesus said that he was sending us out as â€œsheep in the midst of wolvesâ€• (Matthew 10:16), most people in seminary or Bible school are trained for domestic ministry, staying as sheep among the sheep.

All the while, elsewhere on the planet, believing brothers and sisters, living daily in contexts of suffering and persecution, display the unquenchable power of the resurrection. And as a result their children are taken from them. They are beaten. They are imprisoned. They are martyred.

This silence from the West is one I can neither understand nor accept.

Unacceptably Quiet

What does our silence do? It increases the suffering of believers in persecution. It breaks Godâ€™s heart. It demonstrates that we have forgotten our eternal family members who live daily with persecution.

What it may mean is that we simply don’t care.

My wife expresses the heart of the matter when she explains, â€œThere is no such thing as a persecuted church and a free church. There is only the church! There is one church â€“ one church that is at the same time free and persecuted.â€• Hebrews 13:3 beautifully captures our calling in light of this reality: â€œRemember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the bodyâ€• â€“ or, as the NIV puts it, â€œas if you yourselves were suffering.â€•

No nation and no form of government lasts forever. When persecution comes for us, will we be content to have others pray for us, carrying us, to the same extent that we pray for and carry our suffering brothers and sisters today?

There are times to be silent. But this is not one of them.
This is a time to tell the truth, to remember, to recite the stories.

This is a time to speak of God, to share the gospel, to sing the promises of God.

This is a time to pray, to cry out to God on behalf of our brothers and sisters, to count on the Spirit to intercede for us â€“ and for them â€“ when our words are not enough.

This is the time to be the church â€“ one church, at the same time free and persecuted.

Indeed, there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven. Truly, there is a time to be silent and a time to speak.

This moment â€“ the moment that belongs to us today â€“ this is a time to speak.

-------------------------------

Bro Blaine

Re: Thought Provoking Articles by Nik Ripken - posted by TMK (), on: 2017/2/13 15:47

Quote: "What does our silence do? It increases the suffering of believers in persecution. It breaks Godâ€™s heart. It demonstrates that we have forgotten our eternal family members who live daily with persecution."

This suggests that because someone doesn't pray in location X that God will allow someone to be tortured in location Y.

Does anyone really think God operates this way?

I am certainly in agreement that the western church has failed miserably in both awareness and prayerfulness for the persecuted church.

But he is suggesting God needs our prayers, or better stated is waiting on someone to pray, to save a child from being tortured. Really?

Re: western church apathy - posted by Savannah, on: 2017/2/13 16:08

"This suggests that because someone doesn't pray in location X that God will allow someone to be tortured in location Y."

What you quoted from the article suggests no such thing!

The key phrase is, "...it demonstrates that we..."

I see no suggestion at all implied or plainly stated, in heart or letter, from the author.

Re: - posted by TMK (), on: 2017/2/13 17:58

From the article: "What does our silence do? It increases the suffering of believers in persecution."

That seems fairly plain to me.
Re: Western church apathy, on: 2017/2/13 17:58

//What it may mean is that we simply don’t care.//

I agree with Savannah. The key phrase is…it demonstrates that we….In this case if we be honest with ourselves it demonstrates that we do not care. If the western American church is honest with itself it does not care about the plight of the persecuted church in restricted nations.

This is what I believe our brother Nik Ripken is raising in his article. He is speaking about a silence that we should not be comfortable with. A silence on the part of the American Church regarding the plight of the persecuted in restricted nations.

Bro Blaine

Re: - posted by TMK (), on: 2017/2/13 18:36

I certainly agree with that sentiment.

Re: , on: 2017/2/13 18:43

//Somehow the gospel we love has become so associated with health, wealth, and happiness that it leaves no room for persecution, at least, not for those whom God truly loves. If we think about persecution at all, we think its absence from our own lives is a sign of our special standing with God. No wonder we pray so little for our persecuted brothers and sisters. No wonder they hardly even cross our minds.///

I think our brother, Nik Ripken, nails it on the head above what he speaks of the gospel in America. For the American church the gospel is not about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ according to the scriptures. But the American gospel is more of health, wealth, and prosperity. Because of this American gospel the persecuted church does not enter on the radar of American Christians.

Thus it might be said that the American gospel is devoid of the cross of Jesus Christ. Because we are not focused on the cross and its demands on us. We are not focused on the plight of our persecuted brothers and sisters.

Again simply my thoughts.

Bro Blaine

Re: - posted by StirItUp (), on: 2017/2/13 23:06

Quote: “My wife expresses the heart of the matter when she explains, ‘There is no such thing as a persecuted church and a free church. There is only the church! There is one church at the same time free and persecuted.’ Hebrews 13:3 beautifully captures our calling in light of this reality: ‘Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body or, as the NIV puts it, as if you yourselves were suffering.’

How many of our governments from so-called Christian countries, and businesses within them, continue to do business and reach agreements with countries such as China where Christians are persecuted and harshly treated. Why are we not lifting our voices against this?
Is it lack of knowledge? Ignorance? Apathy?