



# Recapturing the Role of SUFFERING

NIK RIPKEN

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*“Unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains a single seed. But if it dies, it brings forth much fruit.” John 12:24*

The testimony of believers living in the midst of persecution challenges the church in the West, and its emissaries, 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

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*Nik Ripken is a mission veteran of 25 years with the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He and his wife serve as Strategy Associates in Northern Africa and the Middle East.*

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 [Muslim-background believers, or 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 witnesses 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 witnesses will model a genealogy of faith that is grounded in the story of God’s people through the ages. They 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, they 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 our lives as we live them 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 vision 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.

... A biblical vision 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 witnesses?" The initial answers are affirming and kind. MBBs express gratitude for the Gospel that witnesses have sacrificially carried to them. They marvel at the selflessness of witnesses 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

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and lost among the nations. MBBs have many kind things to say about Western workers. But, eventually, other answers 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.*"

What are Western missionaries afraid of? According to these gracious MBBs, they 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. They fear that their children might have to move with them to another country, that they might be uprooted from their schools and friends. They dread the thought of having to learn another language. Most of all, they 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. They fear most that "our Joseph" will go to jail or, worse, be martyred because of the faith that has been born because of their witness. Satan plays on this fear as they are accused by the secular media or even other mission partners of "getting this person harmed or killed." This fear tends to make them timid in their witness. When faith does break out, often they 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....

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 their homes, 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 consider taking most of our risks among those who are still lost rather than taking most of our risks among those already saved.

### Learning from the Persecutors

... 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 cross-cultural witnesses 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. ƒ