



Todd Nettleton/The Voice Of The Martyrs

Announcer:

Welcome to the post COVID church podcast with your host, Stuart Kellogg.

Stuart Kellogg 0:12

Welcome, and thank you for joining the post COVID church Podcast, where Today we'll be looking at the persecuted church where believers put their lives on the line for Christ. And what that persecution may very well look like here in America.

Todd Middleton is the chief of media relations and message integration for the Voice of the Martyrs USA and host of The Voice of the Martyrs radio. The Voice of the Martyrs is a nonprofit interdenominational Christian organization founded in 1967, by Pastor Richard wurmbrand, who was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania, for his faith in Christ. vlm is dedicated to serving persecuted Christians worldwide Ty's most recent book win faith is forbidden 40 days on the frontlines with persecuted Christians. Welcome Todd to the post COVID church podcast.

Todd Nettleton 1:11

Thank you so much. It's good to be with you.

Stuart 1:13

First, tell us about the book. Why you wrote it?

Todd1:16

Well, you know, I've had the chance over the last 23 years to travel and sit down and interview persecuted Christians around the world. What happens is often I come back from a trip like that, and I begin to tell the stories and somebody in my Sunday school class, somebody in my Bible study group will say, Man, I really wish I could go on a trip with you. And this book is really my answer to their request, Hey, come on, come through the pages of this book, let's go on a trip together, let's spend 40 days, sitting down and hearing some of the most powerful and impactful stories that I've heard from persecuted Christians over those 23 years. And my my promise to the reader is that on day 41, I think your faith is going to look a little different. I don't see how you can spend 40 days with people who've gone to prison, people who've had family members killed, all because of following Jesus Christ. And on day 41 just put the book down and walk away as if nothing happened. I think your faith is really going to be challenged and encouraged by that.

Stuart 2:11

What story stands out

Todd 2:24

They're all my favorite stories. So it's like, what is your favorite child? I don't know. They're all my favorites. So that's part of the answer. But there is a story in there. And it's a story of a brother named Eamon from Iran. And I found myself actually reading I was reading proof pages on an airplane. When we were getting the book ready to go and I'm reading him on story. And I find that I'm weeping as I'm reading this story. So I'm like, okay, there's, there's something about that story that just grabs me eeman as he began to tell me his story, he said, Now I want you to understand I'm a very competitive person, lets you know, okay, um, and he said, You know, when I was in the Iranian military, and we were fighting the iran iraq war, I told my commander, you send me to the place where the fighting is the fiercest if, if I can't be martyred for my country in the next 24 hours, I don't even want to bother. And he said, when I was a drug user, I was a competitive drug user, like I wanted to use more drugs than anyone else was using. And I wanted to use every drug that anyone could possibly use. I wanted to be the best drug user I could be. And he said, when I was a thief, I wanted to steal more than anyone else was stealing. And if, if someone else tried to steal something, and they got caught, I wanted to go and steal that thing, just to show that I was a better thief than they were. So he said, I want you to understand I'm a very competitive person. I'm like, Okay, okay, I understand you're competitive. But what has happened is God just miraculously rescued eeman from drug addiction. And Eamon became a in his words, if I'm going to be a follower of Jesus Christ,

I don't want to be an average follower. I want to be the best follower of Jesus Christ that I can possibly be. If I'm going to be an evangelist, that I'm going to tell every single person that I talk to about Jesus Christ, I can't imagine why God would bring anyone across my path who's not ready to hear the gospel, because I'm going to tell every single person about Jesus and so out of that has grown this amazing ministry in Iran, where he has led people to Christ, he's led drug addicts to Christ. But if you do that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, pretty soon you're gonna go to prison. And so him on told me the story of being in prison and he was in prison in a cell with 100 people. And he was there for several weeks and over the course of that time, he shared the gospel with every single person in that cell. And 24 of them, prayed to receive Christ were repented of their sin, committed their heart. to Christ. And after he was released from prison eeman sent in his ministry report to his leaders, you know, hey, in the last 30 days, I shared the gospel with 100 people and 24 of them prayed with me to receive Christ. And you know, we think, hey, that's great, you know, 20 it was only several weeks later that his leaders understood that he had been arrested that that whole month ministry had happened in prison. And they called him and said, you know, Eamon, thanks for your report. But why didn't you tell us you got arrested? Why didn't you tell us you were in prison? And he's like, Well, why does it matter? Where I was doing ministry, I shared the gospel with 100 people, and 24 of them prayed with me to receive Christ. Why does it matter if I was in a jail cell or in a police station or in the supermarket? The important thing is 24 people prayed to receive Christ. That's his attitude. That's his spirit. That's the kind of people you'll meet in this book, when faith is forbidden.

Stuart 5:57

Why is Christianity so feared by authoritative governments,

Todd 6:02

You know, a lot of it is power. If, if my first loyalty is to following Jesus Christ, then by definition, my first loyalty is not to the Chinese Communist Party, or the North Korean dictator, or the local mosque leader, or the government of my country, wherever that may be. So a lot of it is power, and and loyalty. They, one of the first times I went to China, one of the people we met in China said, the Communist Party is fine with you being a Christian, as long as you're a communist first, that they want you to understand that salvation comes by being a good communist. And

so if you say, wait a minute, no salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. That's a problem for them, that that presents a you know, they have to, they have to come against that kind of thinking. So a lot of it is power. There are some ideological things, you know, I think of India, where the Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Modi, they understand India to be a Hindu country. In fact, some of them talk about India is Hindu soil, literally, the soil is Hindu. And if you're going to be here, you need to be a Hindu. And so if you're not, you either need to go find someplace else to live, or you need to change your religion. So that is a very ideological motivation. But in many, many cases, I would say even a majority of the cases, when you sort of pull back the curtains, what it really has to do with is power and control of the hearts and minds of the people.

Stuart 7:37

You have experience in Eastern Europe. With those who lived under communism, what parallels do you see in America, as people see what happens when they speak out about their faith, no one will lose their heads here, but maybe their job.

Todd 7:53

You know, it's interesting, because we are starting to see that creep into our American experience. And, you know, we all know the stories of the cake bakers, and whatever we know, you know, the places where, hey, somebody spoke out, and they didn't get a job, they didn't get a promotion, they lost their job, they got fired, they were seen as a divison, you know, that's a troublemaker there. They're a person who can't get along with everyone else. So I think we have to understand and as you know, the stories in the book illustrate our first loyalty is to be to Jesus Christ. And that's going to mean at some point that that we have to say, who were loyal to, and, and so we need to be ready for that. And I think one of the things that comes through in the stories in the book is the idea of counting the cost, and understanding and I think one of the challenges for us as American Christians is, in many cases, the gospel presentation that we heard was come to Jesus, and he's going to make your life better. He's, he's gonna make your earthly life better. Yes, you have the promise of heaven. But you don't even have to wait for that your life here on earth is going to get a lot better if you'll just walk with Jesus. The gospel message that's presented in Iran, or in China or in North Korea is come to Jesus, he's going to forgive your sins, you're going to have eternity in heaven. But I have to be honest with you, your life here on earth is probably going to get worse. Your your family's going to turn against you, your government is going to be opposed to you, you may get arrested. And so what happens when you've heard that gospel message and trouble comes is you say, Oh, yeah, this is what they said was going to happen.

What happens when you've heard the gospel message that says, hey, come to Jesus in your life here on earth is going to get better and more comfortable? when trouble comes? You say, Well, wait, what happened? I you know, God's not supposed to allow this to happen to me or this is not what I signed up for. And so it tends to knock American Christians or or people who have heard That kind of gospel, it knocks them off stride because they say, wait a minute, I wasn't ready for this. And so I think, you know, as we read the New Testament, it time after time after time, it doesn't say, you know, persecution might come it says it will come when you have trials of many kinds. You, Paul wrote to Timothy that all who desire to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted. We need to get used to the idea even as Christians in free nations, that there is a price to be paid for following Jesus, and we need to understand that, and we need to be ready. And you know, the thing I like to remind people of and the thing I think that people in when faith is forbidden would remind people of is Jesus is worth it, whatever the price may be, it's a bargain. It's a great deal, Jesus is worth it.

Stuart 10:51

My guest Voice of the Martyrs Todd Nettleton, author of the recently released when faith is forbidden 40 days on the front lines with persecuted Christians, Todd would good comes out of persecution.

Todd 11:05

You know, as a as a comfortable American Christian, I don't like that interpretation. But there are certainly blessings to be found in persecution. And there are actually many blessings to be found in in persecution. And so I think it's not a fun pathway. You know, pruning is not comfortable. It's not easy. But certainly there are a blessing to and I think, one of the challenges and one of the lessons that we learn from our persecutor, brothers and sisters, is to keep our eyes open for blessings. Even in the midst of hardship, even in the midst of trouble one of the stories I tell in the book is the story of sister Tong. And I went to China and interviewed sister Tong, right after she got out of six months in a Chinese prison. And her crime was she was the host of a house church meeting. So the house church met in her home, the police raided, they took down everybody's ID information, they took pictures of them, but then sister Tong actually went to jail because it was her house, she was the host. And so we met her just a few weeks after she'd been released after six months in jail. And I, you know, I'm thinking I'm going to come back to America, I'm going to write a story for the Voice of the Martyrs magazine about sister Tom.

So, you know, let's kind of get the setting for the story sister Tong, tell me about the prison. And so my translator translates the question, and sister Tom gets what I can only call a heavenly smile on her face. And she says something in Chinese and my translator says, Oh, yes, that was a wonderful time. And, and I honestly look at the transcript. I'm like, wait a minute. I think we have you know, we've got a misunderstanding here. Are you sure you understood my question? Are you under? You know, I was asking about the prison. Yes, yes. I understood your question or now. Are you sure she understood that? Yes, she understood the question and, and what sister Tom went on to say, as Jesus was so close to me. And so he ministered to me in such a personal way during those months in prison. And she said, there were ladies in my cell. And when I got there, they didn't know Jesus. But they do now. Because I got to be the one to introduce them to Jesus. And so, so Jesus was with me. And Jesus gave me a ministry to do so that was a wonderful time. What Why? Why wouldn't prison be a wonderful time? If, if Jesus is there, and if he gives us an opportunity to minister? And the question I asked myself, and the question I asked readers in the book is okay, if six months in a Chinese prison can be a wonderful time, because Jesus is there and because he gives you a ministry to do what is there in my life? That if I would, you know, sort of borrow sister Tong's, classes? What is there in my life that I would see as a wonderful time? Is it? Is it possible that sickness could be a wonderful time? Is it possible that unemployment could be a wonderful time? If Jesus is with us in a, in a real meaningful way? And if he gives us a ministry to do? That's one of the lessons and I think that's a lesson for us? If suffering is really coming for Christians in America or Christians in the West? What How can we keep our eyes open to see blessing and to see the wonderful times that are available to us in the midst of that?

Stuart 14:28

Do you see COVID accelerating the persecution here in America?

Todd 14:34

You know, I don't see it as accelerating the persecution, I do have some concerns about, you know, the government exerting more control about when you know when what can happen and who can be there and how many people can be there. I

Todd 14:48

I think those are things we need to keep an eye on. But I wouldn't necessarily say it's accelerating persecution.

Stuart 14:57

This illustration is so powerful to me from China before Mao took over, you could be a Christian. In no persecution, there were about a million Christians there. Malcolm's in Christianity is forbidden, you can die because of the faith. And a couple decades later, there are 40 million Christians. How do you explain that?

Todd 15:15

Well, you know, the the church historian Tertullian famously said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. And there are those who would say, Well, if there's enough martyrs, that's not true, because they can wipe out the church, I think of, you know, the nation of Somalia, so many Christians were killed, it almost wiped out the church. But something happens in the midst of persecution. And one of the things I think happens is it separates, it separates the people who are there for the right reasons from the people who are not there for the right reasons. And the reason is, if you're not there for the right reasons, if you're going to church, because you want to make contacts for your business, or there's pretty girls there or whatever. When persecution starts, you stop going to church, it's not worth that. So you got a church full of people who are only there for the right reasons. They're only there to worship Christ. They're only there to lift him up and bring him glory. They're only there to spread the gospel and to tell other people, well, when you have a church that's full of only that kind of people, that church is going to grow. There's not a there's not a doubt, there's not a question it is going to grow. And so persecution as it sort of separates the wheat and the chaff. What happens is the church is full of the kind of people who want a church is full of that kind of people that can't help but grow.

Stuart 16:44

You've seen some of the most devastating examples of people giving up everything, even their lives for the faith, you are still a man of hope.

Todd 16:54

You know, I think back to my very early travels, and I actually share the story in the book, we met a pastor who had been in prison he had been arrested like 12 times in the three months before we were there. And what happened is he led a an unregistered church in China, I think their meetings were on Tuesdays. And the church was growing so fast, the government was like, Hey, we got to get a handle, what are we going to do to stop this. And so basically, every week on either Monday night, or Tuesday morning, they would arrest this pastor, they would hold him all day, Tuesday, and sometimes overnight into Wednesday, just so he couldn't be at that service, he couldn't leave the service, and then they'd let him go for another week. And so he had been arrested all these times.

And we went and I, in my mind, I had this picture of this sort of depressed, really downtrodden pastor and and wasn't it great that we could come from America and cheer him up? Because I was so sure that, you know, he's had all these arrests, he's had all this trouble, he's probably really discouraged. And when we got there, he wasn't discouraged at all. In fact, he was quite excited. You know, my church is growing, look at how fast you look at how the gospel is spreading, look at all this great stuff that God is doing. And in his mind, if, if the price of that was he would spend every Tuesday in jail? Well, then that's great. You know, let's go, I could

go right now. So that showed me pretty early on that, that what my idea of persecution and how people respond to persecution was not accurate. And I've had that experience again, and again, where there is just such an amazing joy.

And honestly, I think back to Acts, chapter five, the apostles were taken before the Sanhedrin. They were beaten and released. And it says they left the council rejoicing, but they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. That that little word rejoicing, we see that again and again, among our brothers and sisters. Yes, I went to prison, but look what God is doing. Yes, I had this bad experience of being beaten. But look what God is doing. Yes, my family member was killed. Yes. My family kicked me out of the house. They don't want to be around me anymore. Because I was born in a Muslim family. And now I'm a Christian. Yes, that that was hard. But look what God is doing. that excitement. And that joy comes through again and again from our persecuted brothers and sisters. And I hope it comes through again and again in the stories in this book, because it really is a bedrock characteristic of the persecuted Christians we encounter is just that sense of excitement and joy.

Stuart 19:33

How can people find out more about Voice of the Martyrs and your book,

Todd 19:37

Voice of the Martyrs is at persecution calm, it is an easy website to remember persecution calm, I would encourage people right at the top of that page, we have a button that says free magazine, we would happily send you our free monthly magazine to keep you in touch with what's happening with persecuted Christians. The book is called when faith is forbidden. It is from moody publishers. You can find it basically wherever books are sold. The website though is when faith is forbidden.com. We've got a video trailer there we've got links to different retailers. So when faith is forbidden.com

Stuart 20:14

Thank you, Todd for being part of the post COVID church podcast.

Todd 20:18

It has been my pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Stuart 20:21

And thank you for listening to the Post COVID church podcast: our mission, helping the church share more of the news in the face of persecution, hostility, and disinterest. Please share this podcast with friends. The need has never been greater for a more effective post COVID Church. I'm Stuart Kellogg.

Announcer 20:45

Thank you for listening to the post COVID church podcast. You can find much more at the post COVID church group on Facebook or on the website, the post COVID church.com

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>