

# WHEN FAITH IS FORBIDDEN

40 DAYS  
ON THE FRONTLINES  
WITH PERSECUTED  
CHRISTIANS

TODD NETTLETON



The Voice of the Martyrs

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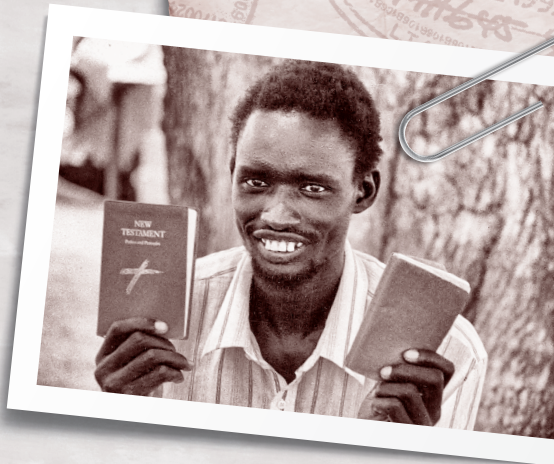
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**DAY 1**

# BEYOND OUR CONTROL



The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

**PROVERBS 16:9**

## *Yei, Sudan, 1998*

It's not unusual, your first day overseas, to be wide awake at 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning. I've heard lots of theories about how jetlag can be beaten, but so far I don't find any that actually work. Jetlag just keeps beating me. During the day, get as much sunlight as you can. Other than that, you just have to fight through it.

Our team wasn't supposed to go to Yei first during our time in Sudan. But the first lesson of travel is that, sometimes, things don't go according to plan. Our goal was to go to Turalei.

It was in Ayien, a village near Turalei, that Pastor Abraham Yac Deng had led a church of four hundred Sudanese Christians—with his small red pocket Bible, the only copy of the Scriptures in the en-



tire congregation. Abraham had been thrilled when a previous VOM team brought boxes and boxes of Bibles to Turalei. The thought that every family in his church could have their own copy of the Bible was almost too amazing to consider.

A member of the VOM team asked Abraham what his favorite verse was, and he quoted Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Four days after that conversation with Abraham and those Bibles being delivered, radical Islamic *mujahidin* attacked Ayien. The just-delivered Bibles were burned, over twenty people were kidnapped from the village, and Pastor Abraham was shot in the head.

The team I was part of, months after that brutal attack, planned to replace the destroyed Bibles. But heavy rains in Turalei have flooded the airstrip at both ends, and the pilots aren’t sure the dry part in the middle is long enough to land—and then take off again—with the twin-engine Russian Antanovs we’ve chartered for aid delivery.

So our team leader decided to switch the order of our trip. We’d come to Yei first. Hopefully we could get to Turalei in a few days. Except now we’re in Yei and we can’t find a ride. We have Bibles to take to the SPLA (Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army) troops closer to the battle lines, but the truck we thought we’d rent isn’t available. There’s another vehicle available, but they’re waiting on a delivery of fuel. We’re staying with very kind missionaries who are taking wonderful care of us, but we are most definitely *not* accomplishing what we set out to.

Finally, we found other mission workers heading our way and joined them. But, two hours into our trip, the bridge over an unmapped river was out. Our lead vehicle plunged in, attempting to ford the river. They made it halfway across before the rain-swollen rush of water began to slide the four-wheel-drive truck downstream. Our teammates climbed out the window onto the roof of the vehi-

cle, and we were able to throw them a rope and stop the truck from sliding any farther, as well as give them a (wet) way back to shore.

So instead of handing Bibles to soldiers near the front lines, we're stuck here waiting for the river to go back down so we can retrieve the other truck.

*What are you doing, Lord? We're on Your side! We want to replace Bibles the enemy destroyed. Couldn't You at least stop the rain long enough for the airstrip to be dry? Couldn't You at least arrange so we could get a truck when we needed one? Couldn't You keep the river levels low enough that we could cross?*

Of course, God can do anything He wants to do. He can stop rain or make it rain. He can dry up rivers or make them overflow. But on my trip to Sudan, nothing seemed to happen according to our carefully laid plans. Why?

I wish I could tell you. I wish I could point to some significant milestone result from our trip and say, "See, *that's* why God let the rains come." I wish I could point to some soldier we handed a Bible to—in a place we didn't plan to be—who went on to become Sudan's Billy Graham. We did deliver Bibles, even though some of them had to be laid out in the sun to dry before being read. We did deliver food, in one case taking high-protein mix to a "hospital" (you and I would probably call it a clinic) caring for dozens of malnourished kids. We fellowshiped with the missionaries who hosted us, and I hope we blessed and encouraged them.

But, due to circumstances beyond our control, we didn't accomplish the goals we set out to achieve.

*Beyond our control.* Those aren't words I like. I want to be in control. I want to make decisions. I want to make a plan and then work with others to see it come to fruition. I want to know the outcome. I want control!

But, once we choose between cornflakes or toast for breakfast,

isn't most of the rest of the day beyond our control? Isn't the whole point of the Christian life to *give up* control to a loving, holy Father who will organize our journey through life for our greater good? As Solomon tells us, we plan our ways, but it is the Lord who establishes our steps (Prov. 16:9). Do you believe that? Do I?

It's easy to get frustrated at all the things beyond our control. A flooded airstrip. A plane that doesn't show up on time. A whole town that doesn't have any gas for sale.

Or, closer to home, a job situation that doesn't go according to plan. A doctor telling you it's going to require more tests to be sure. A child consistently choosing an ungodly path.

Life is beyond our control. Death is beyond our control. So, we have to adjust. We have to be ready to cheerfully change course. We must allow His timing to trump our plans. And we won't always know why. *Why* is for Him to figure out. It's beyond our control.

## FOR REFLECTION

Are there areas in your life where you're trying to exercise control, but you need to acknowledge are beyond your control? What are those areas? What would it require for you to surrender the need to be in control?

For your journal, write about one of those areas, and what it will look like as you surrender control of that part of your life this week to your loving Father and allow Him to establish your steps.

## PRAYER

Father, I admit I want to be in control. I want to make my plans and have You bless what I want to do. Help me trust You to see what I cannot see. Help me surrender my need for control and allow You ultimate control, to trust Your plans are for my greater

good. Help me each day to seek Your face and Your will, and allow You to work in and through me to accomplish Your purposes for me and those around me.

### *For Your Journal*

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### *From My Journal*

October 31, 1998, Yei, Sudan (addressed to my wife, Char)

... I am praying for you, though. I have asked God to send angels to surround our home and protect [it] from the attacks of the enemy or anything else that would cause grief.

The rest of the story: one of the nights I was in Sudan, my wife—who was sick while I was gone—woke up in the middle of the night. Looking up from the bed, she saw clearly the outline of men's shadows on the mini-blinds covering the two windows of our bedroom. She got up and looked out each window, but couldn't see anyone outside. Yet instead of fear, she felt a sense of complete peace, and immediately got back into bed and fell back into a deep, restful sleep.

She and I both believe in angels.





## DAY 2

# “I USED TO BEAT HIM”



I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, *though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent.* But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

**1 TIMOTHY 1:12-15**

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Near Allawa, Ethiopia, October 2005

The nickname “Haji” is a term of respect in the Muslim world, bestowed on those who have completed their *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, one of Islam’s five pillars. It’s not commonly combined with the title pastor!

We met “Pastor Haji” at his grass-roofed house in the southern part of Ethiopia, an area where a rising tide of radical Islam was threatening the church and Christian believers. Outside the house,

there was a burn mark on the wall. One week prior, radical Muslims tried to set fire to Haji's house. Thankfully, he put out the fire.

As we sit, drinking orange sodas Haji graciously offered us, we can look up to see sunlight streaming through holes in the tightly packed grass roof. The holes are the result of neighborhood Muslims throwing stones onto the house, trying to pressure Haji and his family to leave the area or return to Islam. Thankfully, none of his family was injured by falling stones.

Haji understands the hatred of radical Muslims. He used to be one of them! He was so devout, he was sent to Saudi Arabia for special training.

As we stood outside the hut, Haji had his arm around the evangelist that brought us to meet him. Nodding his head toward the evangelist, he said five words I will never forget.

"I used to beat him."

*What?*

"I used to beat him." Haji went on to tell us that he was the leader of a radical Islamic group of young men, and part of their holy duty to their Prophet was attacking and harassing Christians. One of those they attacked was this very evangelist, the man now smiling with Haji's arm draped loosely across his shoulders.

In spite of beatings, the evangelist refused hatred for his attackers. Instead, he showed them love and offered them blessings and good news. Haji had no explanation for such a response. How could a man you were beating show love to you? How could he not grow angry and fight back?

Eventually, Haji's heart was won by the gospel message and the love of the Christian man he was attacking. He left the vitriol and violence of Islam for peace beyond his understanding.

Islamic friends were not happy with his decision. Haji would spend a year in jail. He would face some of the same tactics he'd



used against Christians. Now he was facing rocks through his roof and attempts to burn down his house. But he would not give up his faith in Jesus.

Once again, I'm struck by the *joy* the men and women of our persecuted Christian family possess. Haji is a happy man. His smile is huge. His laugh comes easily and often. This is not a man who lives in constant fear, though the threats against him are real and constant. This is a man having fun, living an adventure, and serving a great King.

Haji is having kingdom impact. Who better to talk to Muslims about Jesus than a former Muslim, one who completed the *hajj*, one so devout he was sent to Saudi Arabia for special training? Who better to spell out the differences between a god who will weigh out your good deeds and bad deeds to see whether you've earned the right to enter paradise, and a God who knows our good deeds can never outweigh our sinfulness, and so sent His own Son to pay the price for our bad deeds and purchase our entrance to heaven with His own blood?

Haji's story is not unique. One of the church's first great missionaries was a man so zealous for his religion he asked for the assignment of hunting down men and women who didn't follow their teachings. Then that man ran into the very One he was persecuting, and was forever changed.

One of our VOM contacts in Colombia has a saying: "A race-horse can run just as fast in either direction." One who is zealous for sin will often become zealous for Christ. One who beat Christians might eventually accept beatings with joy in service to his King.

It's easy for us to look at someone with holier-than-thou religious eyes and write them off spiritually. He is so hard-hearted nothing could reach him. She is so trapped in sin she can never get out. But the testimony of Pastor Haji—and the apostle Paul—is that *none of*

*us* is beyond the reach of God's grace and mercy. And those saved from much are often the racehorses that run fastest for Christ and furthest to reach others for Him.

"I used to beat him," said the pastor. Said the persecuted Christian. Said the kingdom worker. With a smile.

## FOR REFLECTION

Are there people you've written off spiritually, people you've decided God should give up on reaching? Who, in your circle, is "a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent" of Jesus and His good news? Perhaps that's the very person God is calling you to love and reach. Perhaps God has plans for them to be a Paul—or Haji—who will do great work for His kingdom. How can you respond to them in such a way that Christ's love will shine through you?

Write down that person's name and steps you'll take *this week* to begin establishing a bridge by which to deliver the gospel.

## PRAYER

Father, in my own strength I cannot love this person. Sometimes I can't even stand to be in the same room with them! Please give me Your love for them. Help me see them how You see them, and send the Holy Spirit to soften the soil of their heart.

### *For Your Journal*

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### *From My Journal*

We also met twelve MBB [Muslim Background Believers], young people who've been kicked out of their homes by their parents. They are now living with Christian families who have taken them in, and trying to go on with their education. It costs only \$4 to \$5 per month for their housing and food!

Can you imagine your own parents kicking you out of the house? One girl today had that happen at age thirteen—literally kicked out on the streets!

We also met a couple of guys whose wives left or kicked them out when they became believers.



## PRAYING FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

One of the most important conversations new believers in Christ from a Muslim background (like our new Ethiopian friend, Haji) ever have is the first time they tell someone close to them they are no longer a Muslim, but now a follower of *Isa al Masih*—Jesus the Messiah.

That conversation can lead to our new brother's or sister's murder.

It can also open a doorway to share the gospel.

**PRAY TODAY** for new believers all over the Islamic world deciding when and with whom to have that vital conversation.



## DAY 3

# “WE HAVE EVERYTHING WE NEED”



Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. . . . And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

**PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13, 19**

### Outside Irbil, Northern Iraq, January, 2016

We're sitting in a tent in a displaced-persons camp in Northern Iraq. ("Displaced persons" are people who had to flee their homes, but have not crossed a national border. "Refugees" are people who fled their homes and are now outside their home country.)

As ISIS washed over the Nineveh plains, tens of thousands of

people—Christians, Yazidis, Shia Muslims and even ISIS’s fellow Sunnis—fled in front of them. As of our visit to northern Iraq, most were living in tents in camps. The camps are segregated: Sunnis here, Shias there, Christians in that section over there. The tent we are sitting in is in the middle of the Sunni section—one thousand-plus Sunni families all around.

Our host in the tent is a man named Mohammed. I love Christians named Mohammed! It’s January, and it’s cold outside. It snowed a couple of days previously; now the dirt tracks in the camp are shoe-sucking mud. And the wind, which seems to come from every direction, is piercingly frigid. A little kerosene stove knocks a bit of the chill off inside the tent, but I never took my coat off the whole time we were there.

Mohammed and his wife are from Mosul, the largest city in Northern Iraq and at that time the largest city ISIS had conquered. He was a Sunni Muslim when, about ten years before our meeting, he had a dream in which Jesus Christ came and spoke personally to him. When Mohammed woke up, he made the decision to follow Christ—the One who would come and speak personally to him.

At first, Mohammed’s wife was very upset that her devout Sunni husband would become an apostate, an infidel. How could he turn his back on the true faith? But, about three months later, she had the *very same dream* Mohammed had described to her. Jesus came and spoke to her, personally. When she woke up, she made the same decision her husband had: she, too, would follow Jesus.

After hearing Mohammed’s testimony, I asked his wife if she saw changes in her husband after he had that dream. “Well,” she said, through our translator, “he stopped beating me.” *Certainly*, I thought, *a good first step in a man’s walk of faith!*

Having been saved by Christ, Mohammed began to tell others in their neighborhood in Mosul. Now he wasn’t just an apostate



himself; he was actively encouraging other Muslims to also become apostates. Their house was burned down. Police promised an "investigation," but, unsurprisingly, no suspects were ever found. Mohammed and his family moved to a new house, and began to talk about Jesus to the neighbors there.

In 2014, with ISIS about to take the city, Mohammed knew he must get his family out. ISIS wouldn't just burn their house down. They would give Mohammed one chance to return to Islam, then execute him when he didn't. The family fled Mosul, eventually coming to this camp near Irbil. Because Mohammed's ID card still said "Sunni Muslim," he and his family were sent to this tent in the Sunni camp.

But the camp wasn't 100 percent Sunni anymore. Since their arrival, Mohammed and his family had led people from two other families to Christ. Even in the camp, they were witnesses. Given two UN-issued tents on their little concrete slab, Mohammed and his family (they had five children) decided to live in one tent and reserve the other for prayer and Bible study meetings. They were already having an impact, but that impact wasn't unnoticed. Mohammed told us that either he or his wife stay with the tents at all times; they fear Sunnis angry about their faith might destroy the tents if they leave.

As foreigners, our presence draws attention; we can't stay long. After hearing Mohammed's testimony, I asked him, "What are you praying for? What are you asking God for?"

He spoke, then the translator said, "We don't have to ask God for anything. We have everything we need. We are happy!"

My first thought was to argue with Mohammed.

*Come on, now, Mohammed. You live with five kids in a tent! Some of your neighbors would like to kill you! How can you possibly think you have everything you need?!*

In that moment, I think the Holy Spirit said something like,

*Listen more. Talk less.*

There is great truth in what Mohammed said. *We have everything we need.* We have a roof over our heads. We have food for today. And we have a mission field in every direction, right outside our door. What more could we ask for?

Mohammed and his family live in *daily* reliance on God. “Give us this day our daily bread.” They live that prayer every day! They are living what the apostle Paul wrote, that he’d “learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

I find this—living in daily reliance on God—a personal challenge. I think many Americans find this challenging as well. We are, after all, the help-yourself country. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps! If you work hard, you can do anything. And I love that can-do attitude that’s part of the American ideal.

But what about living in daily reliance on God? What about, instead of “I can do all things through my will and effort,” we learn to be content—we live “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me”?

## FOR REFLECTION

What is it that you live in daily reliance on? Is it your paycheck, your job, your smarts, your family? Or is it God? Do you count on Him for *all* your needs, from a roof over your head to the right words to say in every conversation?

Write down the person or thing you are relying on most in your life, then write what it would look like for you to live in daily, moment-by-moment reliance on God.

## **PRAYER**

Lord Jesus, I recognize that I often rely on \_\_\_\_\_ more than I rely on You. Forgive me! Help me put my faith in You, not only in a lifelong and eternal way, but also in a daily, moment-by-moment reliance on Your plan and Your provision for me and my family. Help me see the steps You have ordered before me today, and thank You that, in You, I have everything I need.

### ***For Your Journal***

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### ***From My Facebook Post That Day***

When I asked Mohammed, "What are you praying for? What are you asking God for?" he said: "We don't need to ask for anything. We have everything we need! We are happy."

Sometimes I wonder if I even have ANY quality at all that could be called faith.

If you ever wonder why I do this work and fly halfway around the world . . . it is for opportunities to sit in tents with Jesus-followers like this man and his family. I can't wait to come home and share that story!



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