





PROLOGUE



FEAR clutched the pit of my stomach as the plane touched down on the bumpy runway and taxied to a stop in front of a dilapidated terminal building. I was among only a handful of people who disembarked and was rather apprehensive as we walked a short distance toward the sand-bagged terminal entrance. Heavily armed soldiers watched our every move.

For two days I had unsuccessfully attempted to contact a man with whom I had been corresponding for more than a year. I questioned my sanity for accepting his invitation to visit him as civil conflict was tearing his country apart. But I was naïve and curious, deeply touched by the man's evident courage and compassion in reaching out to prisoners, combatants, and common offenders, amid the bloodshed and unrelenting turmoil of the conflict.

I grew up amid the comfortable atmosphere of a middle-class family in a small town where being Christian and going to church was part of our culture. Yet for the most part my life reflected a bland and passionless faith that was

characterized by believing the right things, being active in the church and avoiding bad habits.

In more recent years, I had taken a small risk of faith by becoming involved with Prison Fellowship International. I found myself increasingly captivated by the examples of men and women who, even amid extreme difficulty and danger, followed Jesus in the way of justice, mercy, and truth, regardless of personal cost and threat of opposition. That's why I am here, I remembered. The people I had come to see were risking their lives daily reaching out to petty criminals and terrorists, and helping their families in the name of Jesus.

After enduring questioning by a very demanding immigration official concerning the purpose of my visit and having my luggage searched for weapons, I made my way to the airport exit. The only people there were waiting for me. I was relieved! The warmth and enthusiasm with which they greeted me was such a contrast to the tension I felt. But the tension was not entirely gone as we drove down deserted roads, through multiple military checkpoints and past trucks crammed full of young men in battle gear. Again I wondered why anyone would risk his life to do good for prisoners in the middle of a civil war.

As we drove into the capital, my hosts talked about the men and women they were visiting in prison: violent people whose lives were being transformed from hostility and hatred to love and peace. They talked about the growing fellowship of prisoners who were turning their backs

on crime and violence in spite of the fact that the prison was a dangerous place.

I spent a sleepless night hearing the unfamiliar sounds of explosion and gunfire, some of them real and undoubtedly some by-products of my hyper-tensed imagination. The next morning the drive to prison did nothing to lessen my anxiety. Along the broken roads and among crumbling buildings life seemed almost normal, yet signs of devastation and conflict were clearly evident. My heart pounded as we approached the looming stone walls of the prison, even though I knew, paradoxically, we would probably be safer inside than out.

A ragged group of prisoners was gathered in the central courtyard as we entered the prison. Some were rebels and others ordinary civilian criminals, most of them part of the Christian fellowship group. The light in their eyes was in stark contrast to their drab and dreary surroundings. I could see the hope and feel the joy among that group of men as several of them shared their stories of finding hope and life in Jesus Christ.

After meeting with the group, I was taken to meet prisoners who were being held in secure confinement. Passing row upon row of dark foul-smelling cells I unexpectedly came face to face with a young prisoner who was leaning against the bars of his solitary cell smoking the nub of a cigarette pressed tightly to his lips. The intensity in his eyes stopped me in my tracks.

He is far too young to be a terrorist! I exclaimed to myself. Flashing brown eyes and the sharp features of his

face betrayed nothing of the violence and bloodshed of his involvement with a rebel group. The young prisoner steadily returned my gaze through the steel bars of his cell door. I found myself gripped by the heart-wrenching story of his life. An unrepentant rebel with a cause, he was determined to avenge the injustice of the government in power, seeing it as responsible for the desperate poverty of his people. His eyes blazed as he talked about the revolution and his hatred of the regime he held responsible for his family's suffering and his father's "disappearance."

When he finished telling us his story, his face hardened and he spat contemptuously on the floor. "Of what use am I in here?" he hissed. "That fat pig president, he should suffer in here and die like a starving rat. The revolution needs me in the streets, not in this rotten pit where nobody cares if I live or die."

"God cares," I responded, almost automatically.

The prisoner's knuckles whitened as he clenched the iron bars which separated us. "Why does God let rich, evil men torment and exploit our people?" he retorted. His fevered eyes smoldered with untold pain and through his gritted teeth he cried, "Why is your God always with the rich and powerful?"

Numbly I looked back at him, unable to respond as he glared at me. His question seemed to ricochet off the tomb-like prison walls. What answer could I give? Common, empty platitudes careened uselessly through my mind and the reeking prison air burned my eyes and throat. I had to break away from his gaze. I felt I had noth-

ing meaningful to say to him, but I couldn't turn my back and walk away even though I desperately wanted to move on to another cell. As I stood there the realization came to me that I could possibly be the only messenger of God's love he might ever hear.

"Jesus knows exactly what you are experiencing," I continued. "He was once a prisoner betrayed by a person He trusted, falsely accused, arrested, completely abandoned, imprisoned, tortured, and a victim of total injustice." "But He did not fight back," I continued. "You know that violence only causes more hatred and more suffering. But Jesus did something more radical than any rebel. He forgave His enemies and overcame their hatred with love." He listened impassively as I spoke about Jesus. To him God had always seemed remote and Jesus was confined to the world of churches and old ladies. Although I knew my words were true, they felt so empty and meaningless in the darkness of the young man's anguish.

The idea that Jesus actually cares about people in their everyday suffering was completely foreign to him, and it is completely foreign to most people in or out of prison who suffer for whatever reason. To many people in our world Jesus is completely unknown or, at best, is only a remote and disconnected historical figure, spoken of in churches on Sunday, and possibly of spiritual help to some people but completely unrelated to their experience. It seems to them that God doesn't know and doesn't care and doesn't act. So all that a person can do is stand up and fight for himself, if he is able to do that.

I understood why it was so difficult for that young rebel prisoner to connect with what I was telling him. He was undeniably a victim of injustice and exploitation. His family was suffering in excruciating poverty and degradation, and he saw no other hope than to fight for the cause of the revolution, even if that meant death. After a few moments we left him and walked through the prison wing, stopping here and there to speak with other inmates. As I watched and listened to my friends interacting with the prisoners, I saw their actions in a new light. They were not only courageous in the midst of conflict, they were the true revolutionaries. While rebels were fighting against injustice, my friends were actually bringing hope to people in the midst of desperation. It dawned on me that in the god-forsaken experiences of those prisoners, the only touch of God's grace they might ever experience is the understanding, love, and help of the men and women I was with.

Several hours later, as we emerged from the wretched prison, the young rebel's question still haunted me. "Of what use am I to the revolution in here?" It was as if the question was meant for me. "Of what use is my faith if I can't live it out? Of what use am I to the cause of Jesus if I stay imprisoned in the security of a spiritual cell?"

What Jesus did so many centuries ago among a captive suffering people is re-enacted again and again in the most unexpected places and in the least likely lives. My experience in that prison is one of many through which I have increasingly come to see that faith in Jesus is not a religion, ideology, church membership or even the recita-

tion of a doctrinal creed. Faith in Jesus is literally a radical way of living our lives, of following Him into the dark, depressing, deadening places of human experience to love and care for those who are imprisoned, whether their imprisonment is addiction, homelessness, physical illness, mental anguish, or literally confinement. Having faith in Jesus should make a difference in the world!

I am still learning that the most revolutionary aspect of being a radical follower of Jesus has little to do with believing things that other people don't believe and everything to do with being courageous, taking risks, and getting personally involved with the needy, undeserving, and unbelieving. Within the very bowels of society an invisible revolution began taking root two thousand years ago amongst the politically disconnected, socially inconsequential, and the economically powerless. It was revolutionary in that God became fully human in the person of Jesus in order to love, forgive, heal, and help human beings in the real world, in real time.

What I experienced in the dank prison of a country torn apart by conflict was the beginning of a journey. I saw rebels whose lives were transformed, not by a revolutionary cause, but by the radical love of Jesus expressed through people who dared to care. For the first time in my life I began thinking seriously about how radical the way of Jesus Christ is in transforming human life. Jesus didn't only proclaim the light of God's truth; He is the light. And after teaching His followers He turned to them and said, "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14).



Radical Love in a broken world

To be a Christian is to follow in the way of Jesus, learning to think and speak and act like Him, not literally, but in the radical way of loving and caring for people as He did. This is a way beyond mere belief, a truly revolutionary way that makes all the difference in the world.

Dare to be a different kind of Christian. Dare to make a difference!

