

Prologue: Detained at the Border

It was one of the most existential moments of my life.

There I was, standing on a walkway looking east across the frozen Yalu River. Across that river – it could not have been a distance greater than 100 yards at the point we visited – were a collection of beautifully built, coral-colored apartment buildings. They looked almost new... but something wasn't quite right. It was February, yet no smoke was rising from the chimneys of that shiny domestic complex. Why not?

Because nobody lived there. The real homes, which we saw later from a hillside overlooking the river, were tucked behind the new apartment blocks. They were much more modest and reminded me of prison camp bunkhouses. The fabulous new buildings in front were merely a façade, meant to impress those looking across the river at ground level.

Welcome to the Asian concept of “saving face” – what the Chinese call *miànzi*.

But it was not the Chinese who had constructed this elaborate ruse for the sake of impressing those looking into their country from across the river. The empty apartment buildings stood on the North Korean side of the river. Behind the apartments, the hills were brown and had been stripped bare. We were told this

was not just a phenomenon of the winter season, but the result of people desperate for any scrap of fuel they could scavenge.

So there I was: a bumpkin from the hills of central Pennsylvania, standing on the border with North Korea, staring into the barren face of what a friend once called “the world’s largest prison camp,” and feeling so thankful to God that I was on the “safe” side of the river... in the People’s Republic of China! How did I ever get here?

My wife and I were visiting China as part of the process of discerning whether the Lord was calling our family to live and labor in the Middle Kingdom. In the course of this visit, one of our hosts had suggested taking us to see the North Korean border. It seemed like a tremendous opportunity. Little did we know it was about to go pear-shaped.

After viewing the border, both from the ground and from a nearby hill – from which vantage we could also see armed guards and earthen gravemounds along the eastern riverbank – we got back into our car to return. We were supposed to fly to another city that very afternoon, so all of our luggage was in the boot of the car. Yet in order to maximize our opportunity to see and pray for North Korea, our driver had been instructed to take the road that paralleled the course of the Yalu River. For a short while, things went as planned.

Then we hit the checkpoint.

Most of the cars, carrying only Chinese citizens, were waved through after only a brief stop. But when our car pulled up, containing a Chinese driver and three foreigners – my wife, myself, and one of our friends – we must have triggered some sort of security protocol. The soldiers were neither impolite nor threatening, but they were firm. They wanted to see our passports. They wanted to know what we were doing. Even after we told them we were tourists, they wanted to know our occupations.

For our friend and for my wife, the answer to the last question was simple enough. The former was a teacher, the latter was a full-time mother. Then it came to me.

“I am a teacher,” I said. It was an obfuscation I had learned from reading Brother Andrew’s book, *God’s Smuggler*. And it was true: as a pastor in Pennsylvania, my primary duty was teaching the Bible. I could give this answer with a clear conscience.

PROLOGUE

The follow-up question, however, was more difficult.

“What subject do you teach?”

Although I had another answer ready – “Ancient Near Eastern Literature,” a tip I had picked up from a colleague with overseas experience – I never needed to use it, because in that moment our friend spoke up.

“Don’t you also teach English?”

It was true. Besides my work as a pastor, I had also taught English grammar and composition for the last two years in Pennsylvania as a tutor with Classical Conversations. Not only was this answer true, it was also less likely to attract further follow-up. Foreigners who taught English were not rare birds in China.

With this answer, the questioning more or less subsided – but our passports were not returned. Instead, we were made to wait while the soldiers completed their protocol. We were brought bottled water, and the soldiers proceeded to unload and unpack our luggage. Although somewhat invasive, this was not overly alarming. Our luggage did not contain anything controversial.

I was, however, becoming increasingly afraid that we might be asked to step out of the car – and that if so, the soldiers might see the shoulder bag which I had so far kept hidden under my feet in the front seat. Were they to discover that bag, and sift carefully through its contents, there would definitely be trouble. For inside my bag, carefully folded and tucked into the inner pocket of a portfolio case, were all the sensitive papers my potential colleague had been handing me throughout the time of our stay. These included a list of Christian books available for distribution, as well as a set of meeting minutes for a local underground church. The papers were bilingual, meaning there would be no difficulty for the authorities to understand them. What would happen if these were discovered?

After about an hour, just as things appeared to be winding down at the checkpoint, we saw a white van approach – the Public Security Bureau (Chinese police).

“Please tell me this isn’t for us,” said our friend.

But we all knew it was.

Thankfully, we were not made to ride in the white van. Instead, our driver was ordered to follow the police back along the river road to their local station. Once there, our passports

once again disappeared inside for the grand tour and our baggage was again unpacked and inspected. The officers were amused to find us transporting chocolate, and we were made to wait another hour while the police followed their protocols.

During this wait, our driver must have thought that his foreign guests were in need of entertainment. Lucky for us, his car came equipped with a television – and even luckier, he was able to connect to a channel playing music videos.

And so it was that on a cold day in February, on the far side of the world, detained by Chinese police along the border with North Korea... we found ourselves quite literally a “captive audience” to the music videos of Justin Bieber.

I am not joking.

In the end, the police never made us get out of the car – and they never found my bag.

They repacked our luggage, returned our passports, and asked to look at the photos on our phone. Having assured them that we had taken no pictures beyond the usual tourist sort, they let us go – but made our driver turn around and return by another way. When we asked our driver why, his reply was difficult to understand – but apparently foreigners were no longer permitted on the river road.

Sometime later, as we debriefed over coffee and the tension faded, we were enabled to see both the humor and the advantage of this encounter. After all, if we were really going to live and serve in China, then we would face the real possibility of being detained by the authorities – for any reason, or for no reason at all. And if you might be detained at any time during your stay... why not have a trial run the first time you visit?

The fact that the Lord used this early experience to give us perspective, rather than send us packing, is itself an indicator of how God had already begun to change us. Right from the outset, He was showing us that life overseas would not be all sunshine and lollipops. In helping us thus to count the cost, He drew us to a deeper sense of His supreme worth.

Ultimately, this is what sustains a missionary in their life and labors abroad – an abiding, living sense that Jesus is worth whatever He asks, because only He gives true life. The world defines life in terms of what cannot be kept: beauty, health, wealth, etc. Jesus defines life not by what cannot be kept, but by

PROLOGUE

what cannot be lost. As missionary martyr Jim Elliot famously said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

On that cold February day on the border of North Korea, we took a small step in learning this lesson. There would be many more to come.