

Key Ingredients

I could not be more grateful this Thanksgiving having just returned from a 15-day trip to the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. I was blessed with the privilege of leading 21 people into these fascinating and crucial countries. This was my first overseas trip in four-and-a-half years since my diagnosis of non-Hodgkin Lymphoma cancer in April of 2010. My doctors finally gave me the green light to resume international travel. I was greatly encouraged on this trip to learn how much the Gospel has become extremely attractive to a beleaguered Arab people. Egypt has become a place of refuge for many war-torn and battered lives from surrounding Arab countries. But Egypt itself looked weary and tired from two major revolutions in the last four years. Arab souls are parched, hopeless in many instances, and ripe for change. Young people especially are demanding greater freedom and a brand-new approach to God and life.

In the Emirates, I was floored by what I heard about Iran. My group and I had the privilege to meet with a room full of young and middle-aged adults from Iran. They were being trained and discipled in their new-found Christian faith. They told us horrific stories of torture, beatings and time spent in jail, while their houses and possessions were often confiscated by the government -- all because of their new-found faith in Jesus. We were told that most Iranians are completely disillusioned and fed-up with the Ayatollah and his theocracy. Less than eight percent of Iranians now attend a mosque on Fridays. Nearly half of the population is experiencing severe depression and more than 25 percent are strongly addicted to drugs or alcohol. Hopelessness prevails throughout the country. Remember the uprising in the streets of Tehran in 2009? It was severely crushed by the government, resulting in many lives being destroyed and shattered. But the spirit of rebellion is still alive and well. In recent decades, more than one million Iranians have become followers of Jesus and active members of the underground church of Iran.



Unfortunately, as is often the case in history, things often get very ugly before human hearts rise up and demand changes for their country and themselves. The Middle East is now experiencing this kind of phenomenon -- big time. My Egyptian friends told me when Mohamed Morsi and the Brotherhood of Islam were in power less than two years ago, the very ugly side of Islam was exposed. At the same time, however, the beauty of Christianity was highlighted for Egypt to see.

Egyptians are diligently searching their hearts, Qurans and Bibles these days, to find the most peaceful and healthy path to God. They are also seeking the pathway of peace for their future as a society, too. And in the midst of this searching process, the theology of ISIS -- the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria -- has taken the center stage of the world, demanding everyone's attention. ISIS leaders are unabashed in their complete allegiance to the legalistic aspects of Islam. They are more than comfortable with the idea that living by the sword might easily mean dying by the sword. ISIS has even recently declared war against Egypt.

The Apostle Paul had a completely different view than what ISIS and many other more fundamentalist Muslims espouse. After all, Paul himself in his early life had tried to please God by being as strict and obedient as possible under the Jewish law. But he soon discovered that ultimate and complete obedience to the law was impossible. In fact, he learned that strict obedience to the law alone is a trap for the human soul. The more you try to please God by the law or outwardly righteous behavior, the more frustrated, angry and violent one often becomes. Listen to these brilliant and Godly words Paul wrote to the Galatians; "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written,

'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.' Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.' But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, 'Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.' Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'" (Galatians 3:10-13)



Rembrandt's "Apostle Paul"

During the two recent revolutions in Egypt, Egyptian Christians captured the attention and imagination of many Egyptians, if not many Arabs throughout the Middle East. The Christians' way of handling violence was completely different than the Brotherhood of Islam. When their churches, schools and orphanages were burned or destroyed by the Brotherhood of Islam, Christians refused to retaliate or even show anger. They prayed and asked God to intervene and save them. Many moderate Muslims spoke publicly in defense of the persecuted Christians, saying they felt more in common with the Christians than they did with the fundamentalist Muslims. The Christians are being upheld and recognized in Egyptian society as never before. During the revolutions they demonstrated a servant's attitude, helping to bind up the wounded and offering comfort to the afflicted. Today, moderate Muslims are begging Christians to stay, not emigrate, and assume an

even greater leadership role in the country. After all, the Christians of Egypt already produce 40 percent of the country's entire wealth.

This is an hour in history, I believe, when many unlikely people are discovering the beauty of Jesus' new covenant. Jesus told his followers that he wanted their hearts, not just their outwardly behavior and so-called obedience. He came to Earth not to condemn people but to save them from themselves and their sin. He came to remind people that God is love, full of compassion, mercy and forgiveness for those who turn to him with contrite and humble hearts. The meek, self-reliant, and non-retaliatory Christians of the First Century stood out in sharp contrast to the arrogant, often cruel, legalistic Roman leaders of the time. The world eventually chose Christianity over the theology of the Roman Empire as a superior way of life. And I believe the same enlightenment is happening in the Middle East today. The more the light of Christ can shine amidst the dark, chaotic, and angry Islam that is often on display in many Arab Muslim countries today, the more people will choose the way of peace and unconditional love of Jesus.

During my trip, I was told about one of the most prominent Christian leaders in Egypt being recently flown to Baghdad, Iraq, where he was escorted from the airport to the city by the new president of Iraq. He was asked to preach on a popular television station about the unconditional love of God, humility, servant hood and mercy as an answer to the lies that ISIS is promoting and people are tempted to believe. I could hardly believe what I was hearing! But that is how hungry the Arab world is becoming for the Good News and a new way of life.

The grace of God, his unconditional love most fully expressed in his son, Jesus, is what every person needs and wants. It is what makes families, towns, countries and lives peaceful and prosperous. The moderate Muslims of Egypt are now calling the Egyptian Christians the new "glue" of their society. Christians are demonstrating truthfulness, transparency, commitment, and unselfish behavior, which are now being seen as the key ingredients or necessary building blocks for forming a new Egypt and hopefully a new Arab world as well.

My group was brought to tears one day when we were in Cairo. We met with families who were caught in the crossfire between ISIS and President Assad in Syria. The men were rounded up; half were murdered and the other half tortured severely. The surviving men, women and children had got away on boats and tried to escape by way of the Mediterranean Sea, only to have been pillaged, raped and robbed by pirates. Somehow they made it to Cairo where they became followers of Jesus and members of the growing underground church, which is loving and caring for them. It is stories such as these which is causing the underground church in Egypt to grow so rapidly. There are reportedly up to a million members of this new

underground church in Egypt. Many souls are being healed, saved and reborn in the grace of our Lord.

I am so thankful to be home, safe and sound with my family. I am thankful for my country and the devoted Pilgrims who helped form it with the love of God in their hearts. Many of you prayed for my fellow travelers and me, for which we are incredibly grateful. And many of your prayers for me to someday return to international travel have been answered. My family and I thank you for being our beloved partners and faithful friends in the telling of the Good News and wish for you and your families a blessed Thanksgiving.