

September 2007

My Time in Turkey

I am currently attending a Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship retreat in Turkey and I want to share with you a few reflections from this fascinating country and its wonderful people.

On my second full day here in Turkey, I looked at the calendar and couldn't believe it was September 11, 2007. Six years ago on this same day, I was in a plane flying to a PFF staff meeting in California when suddenly we were ordered to make an emergency landing. My life has not been the same since. It was not only I, it was my whole country which was asked to make an emergency landing. We had been attacked, but to this day we are still trying to figure out the who, what and why of that attack.



For the past six years, I have spent the majority of my time as a mission mobilizer for PFF concentrating on the Muslim world. Prior to 2001, I was very involved with Latin America and parts of Europe where I still do important work. But, most of my efforts now are focused on the Muslim world. I have taken groups every year for the past six years to Egypt and now Jordan. I started an Islam study group in the northern suburbs of Chicago, which is now in the process of blossoming into an outreach to local Muslims. Why is this happening?

I believe I am simply one of many people the Lord has touched and directed since the tragedies of September 11, 2001. Jesus asks us to love our enemies, as hard as that may be. He also asks us to have mercy on people who are hopelessly captive to religious systems that love law more than grace. We are asked to join the Good Shepherd in trying to help lost sheep find their way back home.



So, now I am here in Turkey as another chapter is opening up before me in regard to helping lost sheep find their way back home in the Muslim world. And, I am learning how vastly different the Muslim world is in this fascinating country. I have always wanted to learn more about the Ottoman Empire and how it succeeded in conquering most of the known world from the Middle Ages to the 20th Century. But what I am learning is surprising me on this trip.

September 13 was the start of Ramadan, the annual 40-day period when Muslims around the world fast from sunrise to sunset. If I were in the Arab world, most people would be religiously observing this important pillar of the faith. But, here in Turkey, it is a different story altogether. About 40 percent of the population is observing Ramadan. The rest of the people continue life as usual, eating in the same restaurants as we visitors from the West.

In the early 1920s, a major revolution in Turkey resulted in the current Republic of Turkey, which demands a secular state. There is no Shariah law here. Yet, the Turks could not be more Muslim in terms of identity. Ninety-eight percent of Turkey is Muslim. Yet, as secular as many may be, they would never think of changing their "religion." It has not been easy for the Gospel to advance in Turkey. Turks distrust most every foreigner, especially Christians from the West.

One of the great challenges of missionary work is to de-Westernize the Gospel, making sure that what we present is not smothered by our own culture. Every human heart is searching for Jesus. So as missionaries, we have to make sure that our efforts are not infested with unnecessary requirements. The Turkish secret police are constantly searching the country for anyone who might want to subvert the current government. Apparently, the three biggest things the government fears are terrorists, al Qaeda, and Christian missionaries. They do not want anything to disturb their current secular/Muslim/Turkish nationalistic society.

But, evidence is everywhere that hurting human hearts are hungering for grace. Turks want Jesus, but they don't want Christianity. Turks want forgiveness, but they don't want to publicly join a church. I am humbled to think that the Lord has asked me and my PFF team to tackle this formidable challenge - to present the Gospel in Turkey in a fresh, authentic, indigenized manner; to find the ways God is and has been working in the hearts of many Turkish people. Our ultimate enemies are not human beings. Our enemies are systems of thought, which take people away from the center and Creator of the universe, Jesus Christ. Please pray for me and my associates as we continue this journey in Turkey.