

Missionary Gracia Burnham Says God's Love Can Stem 'Holy War'

Kidnapped by Muslim militants in the Philippines, the widowed survivor says Christians 'need to show we care'

An American missionary whose husband died in a gun battle ending the couple's yearlong ordeal as hostages of Islamic extremists says that only God's love can stem the rising tide of religious violence in the world.

"We need to find ways to defuse the raging resentment and hatred that fuels 'holy war' and introduce a God who does more than demand rituals—He truly loves us," Gracia Burnham has urged.

"They need to know what it feels like to be forgiven. They need us [Christians] to show we care," she wrote in *In the Presence of My Enemies*, recently released by Tyndale House Publishers.

The 309-page book tells the story of the New Tribes Missions (NTM) workers' harrowing experiences in the Philippine jungle, after they were abducted by members of the Abu Sayyaf, a group with links to Osama bin Laden.

Missionary pilot Martin Burnham died June 7, 2002, when he was accidentally shot by Filipino troops attempting a rescue. Gracia Burnham was wounded in the thigh, but recovered and is now back in the United States, where she is raising the couple's three children.

“People in today’s world will not pay attention to Christians because we can explain our theology in crystal-clear terms,” she wrote. “They will not esteem us because we give to charity or maintain a positive outlook on life. What will impress them is genuine love in our hearts.”

Burnham tells how her 43-year-old pilot husband was a tower of strength as they endured sickness, danger and hunger—at one stage reduced to eating leaves. They were caught in more than a dozen firefights between their abductors and would-be rescuers, but he encouraged her to continue to trust God, as she struggled with depression and doubt.

“I hope nobody calls me a hero because I know the facts about the bitterness that blazed in my heart that year,” she admitted in her book. “I still have lots of maturing to do. ... We all have pockets of darkness inside ourselves. Recognizing how much I carry inside of me was one of the most difficult parts of my entire ordeal.”

In her account, Burnham—who was featured in several major network TV interviews in May—recalled how her husband shared his faith with some of the guerillas. She revealed that in one of his journal entries near the end of their captivity he wrote: “I really feel like I’m going to die here. ... God, please give us strength for the journey.”

Although she knew she was supposed to forgive her captors “the truth is that I often hated them,” she wrote. “I despised them not only for snatching me away from my family ... but also for forcing me to see a side of myself I didn’t like.”

Burnham said that she later came to accept that what happened

was “no one’s fault except that of sinful human beings, the kind we came to the Philippines to help.” She said that she refused to let what happened “dampen my joy or detract from the love that God means to flourish in my heart.”

She wrote: “Some people in America want me to be offended and angry and bitter with the [U.S.] government for not doing this or that [to secure our release]. Others want me to be depressed and morose—the poor, whimpering widow. I can’t be either of those.”

Burnham—who has launched a foundation in her husband’s name to raise money for mission aviation and tribal mission projects—says she wrote the book to “honor the legacy of a wise and godly man who kept me going, trail after trail, gun battle after gun battle,” and resolves to “keep living in the embrace of God’s gladness and love for as long as He gives me breath.”

Although NTM refused to give in to ransom demands, some of the couple’s relatives arranged a \$300,000 payment—though it did not result in the pair’s release.

The Burnhams’ ordeal was not the first time that the Sanford, organization—which focuses on missionary efforts among tribal groups—became the focus of a worldwide prayer campaign.

Three NTM workers were abducted by armed guerillas in Panama in 1993, sparking an eight-year effort to learn of their fate. It was not until two years ago that mission leaders were able to confirm that the men had been killed in 1996, shot by their abductors during a Colombian military raid.

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