

The Man Who Was Beheaded the Day He Became a Believer

Most of us are familiar with the story of the 21 Coptic Christians from Egypt who held fast to their faith and were beheaded by ISIS in February, 2015. But did you know that only 20 of them were actually Copts from Egypt? Did you know that one of the martyrs was from Chad, and he had not been a Christian prior to the day of his beheading?

Although this story was previously reported, I had not heard it before this week. But at this week's World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians hosted by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, which I had the privilege of attending, a Coptic leader shared the account. It is a remarkable story and yet another tribute to the faith of these martyred Copts.

All 21 men had been working in Libya when they were kidnapped by ISIS. But as can be seen in pictures where they are lined up on the beach to be killed, one of them had darker skin and different facial features. This was the man from Chad.

The Coptic Christians were given a choice to deny Jesus or die. They refused to deny Him, knowing it would cost them their heads.

When the terrorists ordered the man from Chad to deny Jesus or die, he answered, "Their God is my God," thereby sealing his fate.

That's how moved he was by the faith of these Christians. Their refusal to deny their Savior, even at the point of death—literally, at the point of a knife to their throats—moved him to make a profession of faith, one that would cost him his head as well. Can we grasp the intensity of this story?

The man had not been a believer. All he had to say was, "I don't believe in Jesus" or "Jesus is not the Son of God," and he could walk away a free man.

He would be with his family again. He would not die a brutal death. He would live to see another day.

How many Christians would be sorely tempted under such circumstances? How many would waver and, for that moment, deny their Lord, just to avoid beheading?

Yet this man, who had not been a follower of Jesus before then, was so moved by the dedication of these Christians that he became a believer on the spot.

"Go ahead and behead me," he was saying. "Your god is not my God. Their God is my God."

That is the power of the gospel, and that is how we overcome Satan, by not loving our lives to the point of death (Rev. 12:11).

That is why this story needs to be told and retold until the faith of those martyrs becomes our faith, until people look at our lives and say, "Your God is my God, whatever may come my way."

And here's something striking. As I have listened this week to the stories of persecuted Christians, even hearing from family members of martyrs, I have not heard a word of self-pity. Not a word.

I have heard words of courage and dedication. I have heard words of great love for Jesus. I have heard requests for prayer and help. But I have not heard any self-pity.

The daughter of an Iranian pastor martyred 20 years ago spoke of her own life experience and of her father's refusal to back down. Now, 20 years after her father was buried in an unmarked grave, she could speak of multiplied hundreds of thousands of

Iranian Muslims coming to faith in Jesus. Her father's blood was not shed in vain.

That is how a seed planted in the ground first dies and then produces much fruit (John 12:24-25).

A Syrian Christian leader shared how a radical Islamic group offered to arm them to fight against another radical Islamic faction. He replied, "We already have two arms: love and forgiveness. We don't want to become another militia."

That is how we overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21). Some Christians even said to ISIS, "Thank you for helping to unite us!"

Yet it would be wrong to think of these suffering believers as super saints, which is another lesson for us all.

Most of them are just ordinary Christians, not preachers or pastors and certainly not big-name evangelists. They are mothers and fathers, young people and old people, laborers and housewives, educated and uneducated. Yet they have remained faithful under hellish pressure, enduring unspeakable suffering.

Yet rather than curse God, they bless Him, and rather than retaliate against their enemies with hatred and vengeance, they offer forgiveness and love.

Earlier this year, a couple told me about their trip to Ethiopia where they met with family members of the Ethiopian Christians beheaded by ISIS. They spoke with the widow of one of the martyrs, who was pregnant when he was killed, making his death even more painful.

But when they talked with this young woman, rather than bemoan her terrible loss, she said to them, "How is it that I had the privilege of being married to a martyr for Jesus?" She was an uneducated woman with no social status, and she was humbled

beyond words that she was chosen to be the wife of a martyr.

This is why radical Islam will ultimately fall before the name of Jesus, and why every other force that seeks to wipe out the church will fail in the end. It's also why we should stop feeling sorry for ourselves when things get a little rough. Are we not also more than conquerors through Him who loved us? (See Rom. 8:37)