

Suffering Evangelism

Steve Burchett

If you had tuberculosis, what would you do?

Doug Nichols is the Founder and International Director Emeritus of Action International Ministries. While serving as a missionary in India in 1967, he contracted tuberculosis.¹ He was treated in a sanatorium in India, and while there he tried passing out copies of the gospel of John to the other patients. It was rejected by everybody.

Nichols had a series of nights when he woke up coughing in the early morning hours. One night he saw an old, sickly man trying to get up out of his bed, but he couldn't. Helpless, the man cried and relieved himself in his bed which infuriated the other patients because of the smell. The nurse who had to clean the mess even hit him.



Nichols awakened the next night, still dreadfully sick. Again, he saw the old man attempting to get from his bed to the toilet (a hole in the floor). And again, the man failed and fell back in his bed sobbing. Nichols had to act. He got up, went over to the man who fearfully trembled (perhaps expecting another beating), picked him up, carried him to the restroom, and brought him back. As Nichols carefully laid him in his bed, the old man kissed him on the cheek.

Nichols was able to fall back asleep, but he was awakened at 4 a.m. by another patient who gave him a hot cup of tea and asked for a copy of the gospel of John. Throughout the day other patients asked for the booklet. God used Doug Nichols' suffering, and his loving behavior, to bring the gospel to lost people in a hospital in India.

Perhaps you have heard of "servant evangelism" or "relationship evangelism," but have you ever heard of "suffering evangelism"? Paul told the Corinthians, "If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation" (2 Corinthians 1:6).

On Paul's second missionary journey, he and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison in Philippi. Instead of complaining, they prayed and sang hymns to the Lord (Acts 16:25). God sent an earthquake, opening the prison doors. The jailer was shocked and was going to kill himself, choosing suicide over the humiliation and public execution he would face for allowing prisoners to go free. Paul knew what the jailer was about to do, so he "cried out with a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here'" (v. 28). Within seconds, the jailer was asking the most important question of his life, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (v. 30). The missionaries then preached the gospel to the jailer and his family, and they were all saved. God's purpose for Paul's and Silas' suffering included the conversion of the jailer and his household.

In a Chinese Prison

The Voice of the Martyrs ministry (www.persecution.com) shared that Pastor Zhang Rhongilang was released from a Chinese prison in August of 2011, having spent over seven years incarcerated. Many Christians throughout the world were praying and working for his release, recognizing this as blatant persecution by the Communist government. While he was in prison (where no Christians may visit), he proclaimed the gospel to the prisoners, guards, and other officials. Upon his release, Rhongilang stated, "I am happy that you and others tried to arrange for my release, but in one way, I am happy that you failed. You almost made a big mistake. If you had been successful, there would be no church in that prison today."

A Rare Syndrome

My third child was born with a rare syndrome. As painful as it is to experience the trials that parents go through because of this syndrome, God has already used it to bring the gospel to the lost. Just a few weeks ago, we were the dinner guests of an unbelieving family who have a child with the same condition. My wife and I never would have known them if God hadn't removed genetic material from one of my daughter's chromosomes. This syndrome has brought a level of suffering, but God is using it to introduce us to people who hopefully will hear the gospel and come to Christ.

"Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory."

(2 Timothy 2:10)

¹ The following story was told by John Piper in a sermon on First Peter 2:9-10, "Christian Identity and Christian Destiny," located at www.desiringgod.org.