

Witnessing deep poverty challenging

Dan Nelson - Pastor

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What makes you cry? What breaks your heart? What makes you angry? What makes you want to get up and do something about injustice? These are some of the questions that I have been asking myself lately and they are the same ones I want to challenge you with.

My wife, Shelley, and I just returned from Egypt where we invested time with some of the most challenged leaders in the world. A Muslim-controlled country, Egypt itself is no picnic to live in as a Christian. There is widespread poverty where few are finding hope of escape. There is harsh religious persecution from radicals and severe legal constraints by the government preventing basic elements of the Christian faith from being exercised, such as open discussion of Jesus. Although it is extremely difficult for some to survive in this environment, it may be shocking to others to realize that this is a paradise of refuge to others.

Many of the leaders we were spending time with were refugees from Sudan and other areas of Northern Africa where conditions are far worse. You may be interested to know that there are hundreds of thousand of Sudanese refugees in Egypt who have escaped some of the harshest realities imaginable in hope of survival. Innocent men, women and children have been beaten, raped, killed, forced into slavery or armed as soldiers, in the name of political or religious advancement. For the past decade, Sudan has been among the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian. Among the refugees now living in Egypt are pastors and Christian leaders, some of them simply emerging as leaders in response to the great need of the people. Most are untrained, lack resources, and are struggling to survive themselves.

While our itinerary was to build them up by teaching at their leadership and family conferences, the impact they had on me was quite deep. As they would put on their only set of clothes that were of good appearance, wearing the same outfit day after day, these blessed souls would not complain a bit as they told their stories of struggle and strife, despair and destitution. Many of these people have borne witness to such atrocities and sheer wickedness that no one should ever have to see. It is difficult for today's coffeehouse philosophers to convince them of the inherent goodness of man; they have seen too much unrestrained evil. After a while, it became obvious to me that some of these new friends understand a bit more about the building blocks of world peace than many of our political pundits and picketers. That's what was so amazing; I saw peace in many of their eyes. Where do they get their peace?

Just when you think you have seen it all, you turn a corner to realize that your education is just beginning. Upon leaving a gathering of Sudanese worshippers where a couple of hundred Christians packed a local church in one of the most poverty-stricken areas I have ever been to, I was told that we would now be taken to Garbage City. I was not prepared for what I was about to encounter. It was explained to us that what started as a Muslim action in the 1960s to eliminate Christianity, by forcing thousands of these followers of Jesus to live at the dump and die, has turned into what is now called Garbage City. This is a whole township of families and communities whose primary occupation is to sift through the garbage of Cairo looking for anything of value to be redeemed for money. The sights and

smells were horrifying. It was all I could do to keep my breakfast inside of me. People filled their streets, houses, and rooftops with inventory and potential income opportunities: garbage. It was absolutely the kind of thing I had only heard about and beyond the worst I had ever seen on television. As I waved to a little child walking with her mother, about the same age as one of my daughters, she and her mother both smiled and waved back to me. My heart was smashed. Then I noticed that someone had a picture of Jesus in a trash truck window. Then I saw a cross carved into a building wall. Then a "Jesus Loves You" sign that was painted on an apartment building. We started noticing this everywhere and couldn't believe our eyes. How could these people hold such faith when they are in such dire straits for life? They are not here temporarily, enduring a difficult season of their lives, this is it. This is their life. There is no waiting list for something better. Do I sense joy here? How could there be joy found here?

When we got to the back end of the city where it pressed against the cliffs of the hillside, we saw one of the most amazing things. There was a huge Christian church carved out of the stone that seated thousands. There were detailed accounts of the life of Christ and his disciples etched into the rocky hillside. In the midst of Garbage City, a place of poverty, persecution and pain, was a center of hope, healing and happiness; and the message of life was the good news of Jesus.

In my conversations here, people want to know where God is in all of the suffering of this world. With all of the evil run rampant, where is God? I want to say this to you. He is right here. God cares and sent intervention. Jesus said, "The Father has sent Me and I am sending you." If you are a follower of Jesus today, you are to "be the answer" — to feed the hungry, to bring hope to the brokenhearted, to bring healing to the sick, to make peace from strife, to connect people with their God. You have his spirit. You are the hands and feet, the salt and light, the messenger and ambassador of God's intervention through Jesus Christ! So I ask you again. What makes you cry?

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Dan Nelson is a frequent contributor to the Ojai Valley News and currently serves the Ojai Valley Ministerial Association and community as editor of the Religion Column. Permission is freely granted to reprint the article in its entirety. Dan Nelson is pastor of Calvary Chapel Christian Church of the Ojai Valley.



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Sunday Worship:

9:00 & 10:45am
Calvary Chapel Ojai Valley
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Mid-Week Study:

7:00pm Thursday
Calvary Chapel Ojai Valley
195 Mahoney Ave., Oak View