

A THORN TO BEAR AS GOD'S SERVANT

In 1993 God changed my life dramatically and I was no longer a professor at the University of Colorado, executive director living in Boulder CO of a non-profit policy center, or a pastoral counselor helping Boulder churches with their pre-marriage counseling. I was on a plane to Armenia as God's servant. I must share a bit about Armenia to set the stage for the real issue in this story.

Armenia was a land of contrast with an altitude of about 2000 feet in the capital city of Yerevan (same as the Midwest in the USA) and with 14,000 ft peaks as in Colorado. Hot summers like Kansas and bitter cold winters like Leadville (on the 40th parallel which is Baseline Rd in Boulder). Mt. Aarat sat just over the Aarats River (River of the Arc) in Turkey and was easily seen from my office extending from 2000 ft to the height of almost 17,000 ft. (the tallest mountain in the world). Armenia was still in an active shooting war with Azerbaijan over the NicoKarabach region next to Armenia.

Each country I have ministered in through out Eastern Europe has its own characteristics. The Armenians have their own unique characteristics; jealousy fills each man's heart and for some his wife may never leave their house for fear that other men would look at her, and then girls must be a virgin when they marry or family dishonor and even death (in an honor killing) could take place. If a girl was over 21 years of age she was considered too old for marriage, a man would find someone younger. The population was short of young men as most had died in the Soviet Afgan war. Thus after 21 many women became a mistress of an older Armenian man, was given an apartment to live alone and gave birth to a child which she raised alone.

While being the first Christian nation in the 300's, the 70 years under Communism had replaced "salvation by God's grace through Jesus death on the cross" with "salvation by the amount of money you gave the church". The neighboring country of Georgia had a saying about Armenians that gave insight into their true characteristics; "If you want to out "JEW" a Jew, put him in business with an Armenian".

This was the Armenia that I found myself in, and with the Lord's help much fruit was produced for God's glory. Religious freedom for denominations other than the Armenian Apostolic Church was obtained in a couple of years of meetings with the Catholicose (equal to the pope of that church). Aid was delivered to war torn villages and refugees even under the threat of gun fire. And, international church services were conducted weekly at the US Embassy with the US ambassador playing the piano and his opera singer wife adding special music to each service. Many other typical pastoral duties of baptism, funerals, counseling and prayer were the normal routine of my life. I give you this overview to set the stage for what then took place.

After some time I spoke enough Armenian to survive alone, but always had an Armenian translator with me for most transactions. Conditions in Armenia in 1993 were so bad that a large part of the population existed on about \$20 per month. All wanted to leave for Europe or the United States and at every shopping transaction my translator was asked by the young woman clerk; "Is he going to marry you and take you to the United States? If not how about me?" And they were dead serious as I was one of the few single Americans. With that as a background the story can be told.

In 1994 when I attended the Symphony on a Sunday afternoon a tall beautiful young lady (Nvart) introduced herself and as we became friends she expressed things differently. She wanted only to help her country and not to leave Armenia. After I took a trip to Israel to gather information to help the Ministry of Energy, I found a new American ambassador had replaced my piano playing ambassador, and this young lady's sister (Mari) became the piano player for the Sunday church services. With all the intent to remain in Armenia for a number of years Nvart and I were married in the Spring of 1995. One of the projects (of many) we were working on was to bring tourism renewal to Armenia as it had been a center of tourism for the Soviet Union and had an elaborate infrastructure for tourism (just as in Colorado). We traveled to the United States to arrange for an organization to support tourism in Armenia, and for the birth of our son, Joseph in July of 1996.

We were living in the Dallas area, working with a number of ministries and getting US government approval for several Armenians to come to support the tourism effort. Why assist tourism? Tourism would help many in Armenia and bring American Armenians closer to the LORD as they toured their ancient homeland. When you help those in need you glorify GOD, and when people see you helping the country they also listen to the gospel of our LORD and SAVIOR.

Marriage was excellent on the surface as Nvart was involved in women's church activities and even requested water baptism together at the Dallas church. But when it came time to travel the US to promote the tourism, Nvart said, Joseph is too young – wait until he is older and then we can do it. We moved to Western Colorado and Nvart said, "Get my family over here so we don't have to send them money every month to support them and they can get a business education and learn English. Then when we all return to Armenia they will be self sufficient".

In 1998 the US Embassy in Armenia approved all of Nvart's family of 5 to come to the United States on an educational visa for a business school program in Grand Junction, CO that I had arranged. When they arrived; quickly Nvart moved in with them in an apartment to help as they did not speak English, and Joseph and I continued to live in the trailer home we had purchased in Ridgeway, Colorado. Nvart's approval for a social security card was given by the United States as I had sponsored her for residency as the only way we could remain in the US for that period of time. With that approval the **marriage changed dramatically** just as if someone **shut off the switch**. She no longer needed me or the marriage. She filed for separation stating that she needed time with her family and that we could continue the marriage after their education was completed. At this point Nvart completely discontinued her church and any faith based activities in an additional complete reversal of what had been during our marriage.

I was working two jobs to provide funds to support Nvart and her family, and only had time with Joseph on the weekends when I had time off from work. These two jobs consumed up to 20 hours a day of my time while Nvart's family lived in comfort (luxury compared to their Armenian existence). They even sent their boys to the local Ridgway school as I helped make this possible.

Employment opportunities were limited on the Western slope of Colorado and we agreed that I would return to Armenia to continue the tourism effort. I obtained a new Armenian visa and sold our trailer home to pay off my debt from the expense to bring Nvart's family to the United States. As I left Ridgeway and drove through Montrose on my way to Denver to fly to Armenia, I stopped to see friends and by accident found out that Nvart had changed the separation to a divorce order (thinking I was to be out of the country while the decree was given). I quickly changed plans and stayed on to at least obtain the best possible visitation time with Joseph, and to provide him support during the divorce.

She proceeded with the divorce, and in the resulting court divorce agreement I was **required to call** to arrange the pick-up time for Joseph as I was granted 4 days out of every 14 days. After 2 months I was **arrested** for making the phone calls that I was **required to make** as the arresting document said I was stocking her via the phone calls. The churches I was working with provided my bail within an hour of the arrest and I still had time with Joseph for 4 days at a time. Nvart was living with another man at the time and with his money she had the best lawyer and the local sheriff (a friend of his) had made out the arrest warrant. The sheriff soon retired and bought a new house with some unknown source of money. A Christian counselor friend in the Dallas area told me that he had suspected all along that Nvart was committing marriage fraud to get herself and her family to the United States.

In February 1999 Joseph and I were to make a trip to Dallas to visit my daughter and her family as my grandchildren were of Joseph's age. The agreement for the visit was to have 8 days to travel and then Nvart would have 20 days. When I picked Joseph up I was told that the time could only be 4 days and an argument ensued. I was angry as this was denying Joseph time with the grandchildren and the argument ended by my calling her a "GAZIO" (Armenian term for a donkey that is only interested in its own desires) and said, "You will get it" (meaning I would withdraw my US sponsorship). Then new court filings were set to take away my parental rights, and I found that the argument had been staged and video taped to provide evidence of the fact (untrue) that I had threatened her with death through the statement (You will get it).

Before the trial time I was working for the US Census and for a mobile home sales firm as the sales manager. Then a false report was sent to the Census office that another arrest warrant had been issued for me. The result was termination of the Census job and a similar action took away the sales manager job. One day a private investigator stopped by the house where I lived and said, "Be careful, in my investigation of other issues, I have found out that you are in great danger".

My income was very limited and I had no funds to hire an attorney. At the parental rights trial the video was used along with the arrest charges for stalking (in spite of the fact that I had been found not guilty by a jury). Even though pastors, Sunday school teachers, and other church administrators testified in my behalf that my relationship with Joseph was that of an ideal parent, the opposing attorney had much of the testimony stricken as the individuals were not a qualified psychologist. The resulting court order by the judge stated that Nvart was given full custodial rights and I could not even see or talk to Joseph until I had been cleared by a full extensive psychological examination and additional court action (even though a complete psychological examination had already given me a clean bill of health). Of course I did not then (or since then) have the funds for such a psychological examination or the required court action to have visitation time with Joseph.

The other pastors and church workers were very upset by the court ruling, but I had told God that if the outcome was to be that Joseph was taken away that I would trust God to see how this could be used for His glory and that some day in the future Joseph and I would renew our father / son relationship. I do trust God that this will occur at some future date.

Since that time I returned to overseas ministry and the Lord has blessed that ministry with much fruit as well as a God arranged wonderful marriage and three beautiful daughters. I never had the funds to complete the required evaluation, or court proceedings, and if I were to attempt any contact without an intervening expensive court order I am certain additional stalking charges would follow that would limit my ministry for the Lord.

I love and miss Joseph very much, and yet my love and duty to God must come first. God loves us both and I know He wants us to be reconciled as Joseph of old (Genesis 46:29&30) and (Gen; 50:20) ***Evil was planned against me, God planned it for good.*** Jacob was in grief for all the years Joseph was gone (Gen; 42:36).

At this point I do not know when GOD will release me from this separation from Joseph, but one very important point for you to understand is that I have given unconditional forgiveness to all in Nvart's family for the lies and deception that they used to be able to get to and stay in the United States. As a pastoral servant of the Triune God that unconditional forgiveness is not optional but a fundamental part of accepting the salvation offered through my LORD and SAVIOR, JESUS CHRIST. For as it is written in the LORD's prayer: forgive us our trespasses **as we forgive those that trespass against us.**

How can we minister to others if we hold unforgiveness in our heart when we know it is a requirement by GOD; as Jesus said, Luke 6: "Forgive and you will be forgiven". The requirement goes even deeper as stated in; Mark 11:26 "If you do not forgive your FATHER in heaven will not forgive you". And, we leave the judging to GOD as in: Luke 6:37 "Judge not, and you shall not be judged", and in Luke 18:7 "GOD says HE will be the judge and avenger". In this regard note that I withdrew my sponsorship toward US citizenship as that was a requirement by US law as we were no longer married and she had used marriage fraud to gain that sponsorship. The result was then governed by GOD in that it resulted in years of US government trials and heartache for Nvart and her family, and even the death by an unfortunate accident of the man she moved in with and later married. GOD is the judge and avenger and we leave all to GOD and only give Christian forgiveness and unconditional Christian love to those that hurt us.

If you want to be a servant of the Triune GOD, expect many attacks to come your way and find a way in FAITH to trust GOD that any and all THORNS IN THE SIDE can be as Paul said a reason for rejoicing (Romans 8:28). Yes, when I hear stories of father/son relationships, or see my 14 year old grandson (who is one half year older than Joseph) there comes a tug on my heart and tears to my eyes, and yet I know and trust GOD that someday Joseph and I will be reunited.

One of the things that gives me comfort and hope in addition to my faith in the LORD is a story of a friend from my childhood in Nebraska. After high school that friend married and had a daughter. Before the daughter was 3 years old the mother divorced my friend and with a good lawyer gained total custody that did not allow for any visitation. My friend moved to Colorado and we lost touch with each other for years. Later in life we renewed our friendship and I learned the rest of the story! He had remarried and had his own successful business. One Friday evening his phone rang and his wife (Judy) answered the phone. The female voice said, "Is this the home of Doug"? His wife said, "Yes, who is this?" The female voice said, "This is his daughter. I am 20 now and have only heard very terrible things about my dad all my life. No man could be that bad, and so I have come to Colorado to learn the truth." They were reunited and have continued an excellent father / daughter relationship to this day.

Yes, I pray each and every day for Joseph and that GOD will soon allow us to be reunited, but I also know that GOD's timing is perfect and not to be questioned. Thus I pray and wait and hope you understand and will pray also. And if you are the LORD's servant I pray for your strength to bear the "Thorn In The Side" that GOD may have given to you.

All this is to say:

Soli Deo Gloria

"To God alone be the glory"