

THE
INSANITY
of
OBEDIENCE



WALKING WITH JESUS
IN TOUGH PLACES

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with BARRY STRICKER



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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Foreword by Brother Andrew

Warning: this is a difficult book. Not because it is hard to read, but because it makes me uncomfortable. Radically uncomfortable!

This book will turn your life upside down. In fact, I recommend you read it on your knees. Because if missionaries (career as well as short-termers), mission-sending agencies, church leaders, those who support missionaries and mission agencies, plus all who pray for missionaries truly take this book to heart, there will be an incredible harvest for the kingdom of God.

Yes, the insights in this book are that radical. And, this radical message is for every follower of Jesus Christ.

When I read Nik's first book, *The Insanity of God*, I didn't like the first half very much. I'm just being honest. Like most people I like stories of success and victory. Nik had a testimony of defeat—how else do you describe beginning your ministry in a nation with 150 believers and ending it six years later with just four? No, we want stories of triumph—start with four and grow a church to 150 or better 1,500,

or 15,000. That's a story that sells. Then everyone wants to know your secrets of success and imitate your "formula."

Yet it was in defeat, following the death of their teenage son on the mission field, that God took Nik and his wife Ruth on a journey of discovery. God didn't lead them to a seminary or a mega-church leadership conference. Rather he took them to more than seventy countries where Christians are persecuted, often severely. Nik met believers who spent years in prison because of their faith or who had family members martyred. Under such oppression the church survived, often thrived, and in China exploded in unprecedented growth.

For over a dozen years Nik has done in-depth interviews with more than 600 believers in persecution. In the process he's learned what victorious faith looks like in spite of circumstances. That journey of discovery forms the second half of Nik's first book. It left me wanting more. I needed to know what this means to us. How do we, particularly in the free West, take this incredible body of knowledge learned in the crucible of suffering and apply it to our missionary efforts? That's the question this book answers.

To explain the impact of Nik's books on me I need to tell a personal story. In my office I have a photo. It was taken in 2002 in a hotel in the midst of a radical Muslim region. Two men are with me smiling for the camera. They are dressed simply in indigenous clothing. They had come secretly to my hotel after midnight to tell me their story. For security reasons I identify them only as S and Q.

S was a handsome young man with a nicely trimmed black beard. His English consisted of saying, "Hi, my name is S." So we spoke through a translator. S was raised in a very religious home. His grandfather was an imam. His father was an imam. Two of his brothers were imams. He memorized the entire Qur'an in Arabic even though that was not his native language. S became an imam,

taught religion at a government school, and regularly led prayers at the neighborhood mosque.

The teaching job gave S access to a library where he made a valuable discovery. Among the many books covering Islam were volumes about Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Another imam, recognizing S's hunger for knowledge, initiated a discussion about which religion is true. It soon became evident that this imam was a secret follower of Jesus Christ. After several conversations comparing Islam and Christianity, S was introduced to the New Testament. S began reading the Gospels and met the person of Jesus. "I realized that there is no one like Christ after God," S explained. "Christ is the true revelation of God. In reality, He is God."

It had been two years since S had become a follower of Christ. He had given up serving as an imam and teacher of Islam so he was struggling to earn a living. To complicate matters, one of his brothers had learned of his conversion and vowed to kill him. So for the past two months S had lived in hiding. So what was he going to do? With a big grin my new friend announced "I want to be an imam for Jesus!"

One of my colleagues met with S two-and-a-half years later and learned that he was now working covertly in a region where a fierce fundamentalist Muslim group was in charge. In the midst of radical Islam S initiated clever conversations to determine which individuals might be interested in learning about Jesus. He had led many to faith in Christ, including one of his brothers, and now made the rounds of several underground congregations that secretly met in homes. He had just married a woman fourteen years younger—she had been promised to him when she was just three. Patiently he had told her of Jesus, until she had come to faith.

Two weeks after that meeting I received a phone call. S had been captured by Muslim fundamentalists. Despite our prayers, we

never saw him again and we believe he died sharing his faith. He simply could not keep quiet about Jesus.

Q was just as bold in working for Christ and the death of S did nothing to dampen his passion. He traveled the same route as S and took over care of those house churches. Like S he led people to Christ while narrowly evading a couple of attempts on his life. But after a few years, his “luck” ran out. Q was also captured and killed.

I look every day at that photo and grieve the loss of these two dear brothers. But I also marvel at their example. You see, I am free to share Jesus with my neighbors. I can cross the street and knock on their doors. They may slam the door in my face, but I won’t be kidnapped or killed for talking about Jesus. Yet, how often do I go and talk to my neighbors about Jesus?

By contrast, S and Q woke up every morning eager to tell people about Jesus, knowing it could cost them their lives that very day. Eventually they paid the price. I’m convicted because they followed the way of Jesus. It’s the hard way. It’s the way of the cross.

So here’s the challenge. Am I more free because I live in a democracy and enjoy religious freedom, yet I’m hesitant to talk about Jesus? Or were S and Q more free even though immersed in the culture of radical Islam, living under Sharia law, knowing people were eager to silence their witness? These two men spread the gospel in an area most of us would consider impossible for any missionary work. Indeed, western missionaries cannot go into this particular region. Still these two men planted churches. I ask you, who was more free?

The faith of S and Q shames me and inspires me. Nik has six hundred more examples. The depth of his research brings the lessons of the Persecuted Church to all of us. We must listen and learn from this part of the body of Christ that suffers just because they follow Jesus. These men and women have put the focus back on the Great Commission. Their words and actions conclusively

demonstrate what I have always believed—no doors are closed to the gospel. In fact, as Nik shows, Jesus is already working in areas where we think it simply isn't safe to go.

The radical findings and conclusions discovered by Nik from his experiences and the research he accomplished should challenge us all to the core. In this book, you can understand why Nik calls the response to those findings and conclusions *The Insanity of Obedience*. However, Nik shares with us that “obedience” is exactly what the Lord calls each of to, regardless of our location or our circumstances. You will find out that the answers as to how one comes to obey are not easy. But, the Church, as I can testify in my country of Holland, is not growing where living out the faith is easy. That's why we need to study Nik's books (and others such as *Radical* by David Platt). We need to get back to the radicalness of the gospel message. If every Christian took the messages found in *The Insanity of God* and *The Insanity of Obedience* seriously and applied them diligently, the result would be a revolution. Not a revolution of guns, but of love. We might even win the world.



Prologue

Recently, we led a training meeting with some believers in China. In public remarks, I commented on the significant spiritual harvest among the Chinese. I enthusiastically described how that harvest had been an encouragement to the global Body of Christ. My tone was almost boastful. That was not my intention, of course; I was simply overwhelmed by the work of the Spirit in drawing people to faith.

After my remarks, a Chinese house church leader asked me to join him for a meal. With unflagging gentleness, this church leader firmly challenged the number of believers in China that I had cited. His comment took me off guard; after all, I had used the most conservative estimate quoted by Westerners! I defended my figures and I explained to my host the source of my statistics. He listened to me patiently. Then, with a smile, he agreed it might be possible to support the numbers which I was using. At the same time, he suggested a different way of interpreting the numbers being bandied globally.

I will never forget what he said next: “Of that large number of believers that you described in your talk, two-thirds of those people are what we would call ‘members.’ Only one-third of those people are who we would call ‘true followers of Jesus.’”

I was puzzled by that distinction and I asked my new friend to explain the difference in those two categories.

He said, “Probably two-thirds of the people you mentioned regularly attend a house church. Most of those people have been baptized. Most of those people contribute financially to the work of a house church.” He paused before continuing: “*But we do not consider church members to be true followers of Jesus until they have led other people to Christ and until they have helped plant more house churches.*”

I found myself moving into the mode of researcher as I began to absorb his comment, but then I stopped short, seized by the implications of what this church leader was suggesting. The next question which entered my mind was intensely personal: *Am I simply a member of the church or am I a true follower of Jesus Christ?*

That crucial question is at the heart of this book: are we simply members of a church or are we true followers of Jesus? This central question brings to the surface many other important questions. Is there anything in our lives we are holding outside of God’s authority and control? Is there any place in the world where we are unwilling to go for Him? Is there any person we are unwilling to love or forgive?

Essentially, are we simply members of a group or are we true followers of Jesus and part of His Body?

The book you hold in your hands is an invitation to ask crucial questions and a challenge to deal with the implications of our answers.



I walked down the steps of the small airplane which had landed in a desert area separating two Central Asian countries. I expected to be met by a European doctor. Much to my surprise, though, I was immediately “accosted” by five men dressed in conservative Muslim clothing. Pulling away from their physical grasp, I tried to make my way into the tiny airport to book a flight out of this dangerous environment. I felt certain I had just walked into a trap, and I was sure my life was in jeopardy.

Just before I entered the small terminal building, one of the men whispered to me, “We are followers of Jesus.”

The men led me to a small hotel room. After serving tea and exchanging pleasantries, they said to me, “We know how to be Muslims in a Muslim country. We even know how to be communists in a Muslim country. What we do not know is how to be followers of Jesus in a Muslim country. We were praying at one a.m. this morning and the Holy Spirit told us to go to the airport, meet the first plane that landed, and greet the first white man who exited that plane. God sent us to meet you. He has sent you to teach us what you have learned from other believers in persecution—how to follow Jesus in a place like ours that seems to be controlled by evil.”

This book is for those men.



I was secretly sharing with believers from Muslim backgrounds outdoors in the bush of a North African country each evening. We talked together late into the night for a week. There were twenty men and seven women in the group. On the third night of our conversation together, as we focused on vibrant stories of survival in the midst of persecution, one of the young ladies in the group blurted out, “When our families beat us, are we allowed to fight back?”

The young believing men in the group were paralyzed by the question. As the other women gathered around their sister and held her tight, the whole group looked to me for an answer to her question.

This book is for her.



They came to us from a college campus in what we call “the Bible Belt” of America. They talked fervently about their ministry to international students, especially students from Muslim backgrounds.

They talked about the struggle of ministry, and they talked about reasons to celebrate. They talked about their excitement in seeing a handful of Muslim college students give their lives to Jesus.

They then described how they had taken their new believing friends to a Western-styled church, introduced them to church leaders, witnessed their baptisms, and welcomed them into the local fellowship. They also admitted that it felt like these new followers of Jesus were treated like “trophies.” Sometimes, in fact, the pictures of these new believers were even plastered on the church websites.

Then, with broken hearts, they said to us, “All of these students who have come to Christ from Muslim backgrounds have now disappeared. We heard that many were forced to return to their home countries. We heard that the young men were placed under the authority of their most conservative uncle and that the young women were taken home and married off to older Muslim men. What are we supposed to do? What did we do wrong? Help us!”

This book is for them.



Another group told this story: “Dr. Nik, we had a growing ESL (English as a Second Language) class on our church campus with international women from countries hostile to the Christian faith. Everything was going so well and it seemed that many of our students were just about to express faith in Jesus. Then they all disappeared. They simply stopped coming to class. When we went looking for them, we found evidence that a religious leader had come from another city and threatened them against ever returning to this church property.”

The class leaders’ question was sad and heartfelt: “What do we do now that we have lost our ministry to these people?”

This book is for them.



I rode in a van for eighteen hours across China. Waking up from a long sleep, I found myself in a compound surrounded by approximately 150 leaders of a house church movement. Before I could even introduce myself, the gathered group said to me, “Forty percent of our group has already been in prison for three years. That means that 60 percent of our group has yet to go to prison. Will you teach us, Dr. Nik, how to prepare to go to prison?”

This book is for them.



The house church elder explained that the Holy Spirit woke him up in the middle of the night and told him to gather together the fruits, vegetables, and meat that the house church had stored up to care for people in need. The Holy Spirit told the man to take this load of food, by horse and sled, to a pastor’s family who had been left to die in a one-room hut in the frozen tundra.

The man reminded the Holy Spirit that it was thirty degrees below zero outside and that there was no way that he would survive the trip. The man reminded the Holy Spirit that the wolves would probably eat his horse and then eat him.

Then the words of the Holy Spirit rang in his ears: “You do not have to come back; you simply have to go.”

This book is for him.



I listened as some “Bible women” in China taught about church planting and evangelism. Their boldness was almost scary. Their ability and willingness to share the Good News of Jesus Christ everywhere they went was inspiring. Wanting to understand more about

leadership in this house church movement, I listened to these women explain: “God has chosen men to pastor the house church with a mixed audience.” Then, with sheer joy radiating from their faces, they added, “Look how good God is! God has given men the ministry of the church and He has given women responsibility for the rest of the world!” These women exulted in the grace of God in allowing them to be “sheep among wolves” out in the world for His sake, and they considered this command a high and holy privilege.

This book is for them.



Current trends in the Western evangelical church are alarming. When we were young church planters in sub-Saharan Africa, we were taught to measure what was called the “front door” and the “back door” of church planting. The “front door” measured how many new people came into the church. The “back door” measured how many people left the church. The goal was to end up with a positive figure; the hope was that there would be more people coming in than going out! Large losses, we were told, indicated a weakness in the area of discipleship. In the early days, we were told that a “back door” loss of, say, 20 percent was unacceptably high.

Today, that “back door” figure for the American, evangelical church hovers around 76 percent! Between the late high school years and the middle years of college, more than 72 percent of the church’s young people are leaving through the “back door.”¹

This book is for them.



Even more, this book is for all of us who love the church, the beloved Bride of Christ!



The book that you hold in your hand dares to ask the questions: Are we willing to walk with Jesus in the hard places? Are we willing to live among—and to love—those who have little or no access to the gospel? This book is offered to Christians who are tired of merely being “members” of a church and who want to be “true followers” of Jesus.

Thank you for giving this book a hearing! As you read, we pray that you will hear the laughter and the joy in the background of stories which often have a tough edge to them. As you turn the pages, we pray that you will imagine families at worship in their homes, fathers baptizing their wives and children, and brothers and sisters in Christ finding joy in the high honor of suffering for Jesus.

Ultimately, this is not a book about persecutors and persecution. Instead, this is a book about Jesus. This is a book about the Body of Christ obediently carrying His love and grace to a lost and broken world. This is a book about who we can be as true followers of Jesus.

In our first book, *The Insanity of God*, we sought to answer the questions, “Why give your life to Jesus and then naturally share your story and His story across the street while also getting on a plane, taking your love for Him to the Nations?” Be assured, Jesus’ story is to be vocalized while we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, while also being His peacemakers to the Nations.

This book, *The Insanity of Obedience*, dares to answer the questions, “What do we do after crossing the street and getting off the plane?” There will be some “do this but don’t do this” in the book, but it is also a spiritual guide for experiencing the battle between the principalities and powers while squarely on the side of the Good News. Have no doubt; this is a dangerous stance to take. If you want all this life, this temporal world has to offer, put the book down. If you are determined to be defined by the Resurrection, read on.



Our Marching Orders

At the risk of sounding a bit “preachy,” allow me a moment to restate the obvious—for what we have heard the most often might well be the very command we ignore the most. As the Gospel of Matthew comes to a crescendo, Jesus gave His followers a final word of instruction. We often refer to these words as the “Great Commission.” With stark simplicity, Jesus set out the calling and the mission of those who would follow Him. “Go,” He commands, “and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). From that day until now, Jesus’ followers have endeavored to fulfill that assignment. Whatever else the church takes on, it is broadly understood that both “going” and “making disciples” are essential and defining tasks. The church cannot be the church unless it is going and making disciples.

Interestingly, Jesus’ final instruction was nothing new; it is utterly consistent with His overall ministry. Early on, as Jesus invited Simon and Andrew to follow Him, He explained that He would make them

“fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). Later, Jesus designated twelve apostles. They were appointed “that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14). He called them close, and then He sent them out. Consistently, this invitation *to walk closely with* Jesus is linked with the command *to go out with* Jesus. In fact, it becomes clear that an intimate relationship with Jesus necessarily leads to a life of ministry and service and mission for **all believers**. *God is a sending God*. Repeatedly, He draws people close and then He sends them out. In the Gospels, we encounter this same pattern over and over again.

When Jesus sent His followers out, He gave explicit guidance. He also explained clearly what would happen to His followers as they obeyed Him. In Matthew 10, Jesus gave the Twelve “authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matt. 10:1). He told His followers exactly what message to proclaim (v. 7). He also gave them specific instructions about their upcoming journeys (vv. 5–15).

Some of His instructions sound uncomfortable and even potentially dangerous. For these specific and short trips, Jesus told His followers to take no money as they journeyed. He told them to take no bag. He told them to take no extra clothing or shoes. Evidently, Jesus wants His followers to experience God’s sufficient provision firsthand.

As challenging as some of Jesus’ specific instructions were, however, what He had said to this point was downright encouraging compared to what He said next. “I am sending you out,” He explained, “like sheep among wolves” (Matt. 10:16).

Like sheep among wolves. With that simple, startling phrase, Jesus defined the identity of His followers: they are like sheep. At the same time, He clarified the identity of the people they would meet in the world: they are like wolves. It is not especially difficult to ascertain what will happen to sheep in the presence of wolves. Even if we have

no personal experience with either sheep or wolves, we plainly see how this scenario plays out. Frankly, it is not good to be a sheep in the presence of wolves. Sheep don't normally survive in the presence of wolves! Even so, Jesus wanted His followers to understand both their true nature and the true nature of the world in which they would journey. Jesus wanted His disciples to understand both the content of the gospel and the context in which it was to be shared. What He offered was a simple statement of fact.

And notice this: Jesus did not ask the sheep to behave like wolves, and He certainly did not suggest that the wolves would behave like sheep!

After setting this image before them, Jesus did not give His followers the opportunity to revisit their earlier commitment to Him. He did not ask them if, in the light of these new words, they *still* were serious about following Him. After all, they had already answered His call, and obedience to Him was the necessary next step. With some notable objections, His followers obeyed. They went.

And ever since, His followers have continued to go.

Jesus said plainly that He was sending His followers out “like sheep among wolves” (Matt. 10:16). Then He told them even more. He told them that they would be handed over to the local councils, flogged in the synagogues, and brought before governors and kings as witnesses. He told them that they would be arrested, betrayed, and hated (vv. 17–22). In a word, His followers would be persecuted (v. 23). Jesus made it clear that this impending persecution was not merely a possibility; for those who would obey Him, persecution is a certainty.

In response to His instructions, Jesus' followers set out on this grand and frightening adventure, and, sure enough, they experienced everything that Jesus had promised. They went out as sheep among wolves, and they experienced what sheep typically experience in the presence of wolves. Predictably, the sheep were true to their identity.

Just as predictably, the wolves were true to theirs. And the inevitable result is precisely what Jesus has promised: persecution.

If there is any possible way to do it, we generally want to relegate passages like Matthew 10 to the distant past. We want to keep passages like Matthew 10 as far as possible from our own experience. Obedience to these ancient words, in today's world, would potentially be seen as unbalanced—even insane. Especially within the church today, we might be encouraged to avoid taking Jesus' instructions too seriously.

All the same, we claim that we are utterly devoted to Scripture. With great respect, we study to understand the world of these earliest followers of Jesus. We read about their suffering and we celebrate their costly obedience to Jesus' call. Jesus clearly told His followers long ago that they would suffer, and they did suffer. We know the story of these faithful followers is true.

As true as this story of ancient persecution is, however, we long to believe that these verses are merely "history." We want very much to believe what happened to these earliest disciples is not what will happen to us. We want to believe Jesus' words in Matthew 10 do not apply to believers today—at least, not to all believers!

We desperately cling to the possibility that these hard verses do not apply to us.

But what if Matthew 10 is not merely "history"? What if Matthew 10 is a true word intended for Jesus' followers of every time—a true word intended for even our time? *What if Matthew 10 is about you and about me?* What if "sheep among wolves" is an accurate description of both our calling and our world today? What if Jesus' followers—His followers today—really are like sheep? And what if the world—the world today—really is filled with wolves?

Opening ourselves to the truth of God's Word is dangerous. Popular theologies would tell us suffering can be avoided, that there is a way to be both faithful and comfortable at the same time, that there

is a way to be both obedient and safe, that persecution is the destiny of believers who live only at certain times or in certain places, that God will reward obedience with success and security. Popular theologies would tell us that, even if we are sheep, it is possible to minimize our exposure to a world filled with wolves.

God's Word—lived out in present active tense—however, tells us something very different. Jesus would have us understand that His followers—His followers long ago and His followers today—are, in fact, sheep. Jesus would have us understand that our world—our world long ago and our world today—is filled with wolves. And knowing the certain outcome of that encounter between the sheep and the wolves, Jesus would have us understand, even in this kind of a world, He fully intends to accomplish His purposes. Jesus will use these sheep to complete His great plan.

Judging by what eventually happened to Jesus Himself, we come to understand that persecution and suffering and sacrifice are necessary parts of His ultimate strategy, even today.

This book retells the story of that strategy. This book tells the story of modern-day followers of Jesus who understand what it means to live as sheep among wolves. This book tells the story of Jesus' settled intention to accomplish His purposes using unlikely things like persecution and suffering and sacrifice and martyrdom. This book is about the unlikely followers of Jesus who model the characteristics of sheep.

Jesus' instruction is compelling in its clarity. It is not a suggestion; it is a command. "Go!" He says. "I am sending you!"

But what He says next is quite a surprise: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves."

We have the high privilege of answering Jesus' call to go. But let us be clear about this: we go on His terms, not ours. If we go at all, we go as sheep among wolves.

Why then, given that Jesus led His disciples every day to be with Him "to seek and to save what were lost" (Luke 19:10), did He feel it

necessary to one more time command us with the Great Commission of Matthew 28?

Can it be that which Jesus lived and commanded the most is what we ignore obeying the most?

Today are we willing to follow Jesus to the tough places; anywhere and anytime He still commands?

More than Talking Points

- Is this command of Jesus always defined by His desire today to “seek and to save” those who are lost? Who are you seeking today?
- One enlightened brother said every Body of Christ who have a heart for the Nations needs four types of people: (1) Those who go, (2) Those who send, (3) Those who raise support for those who go, and (4) Those who welcome the Nations in their midst to their homes. Evaluate the obedience level of your church by these statements. Evaluate your commitment.