

20 - a Trip to North Korea

by Ben Torrey

Ben Torrey shares his experience of visiting North Korea with a Christian humanitarian organization, highlighting the selfless dedication of a TB sanatorium director.

Duration: 8:45

Scripture: Psalm 23:1-3, Proverbs 16:9, Matthew 5:16, Matthew 28:19-20, Romans 12:10, Galatians 6:9, James 1:27

Topics: "North Korea"

Description

In this video, the speaker shares his recent trip to North Korea and his observations of the country's landscape and people. He describes how the once beautiful hills are now covered with buildings and concrete. The speaker also mentions seeing people preparing fields for planting and using oxen and tractors for farming. Despite not being able to interact with the locals, the speaker believes that their friendliness and the presence of a cross on one of their vehicles conveyed a sense of friendliness as Americans and Christians. The speaker also highlights meeting the director of a remote rest home, whom he considers a hero.

Transcript

Good evening, this is Ben Torrey back with you once again. Recently, I took a trip to North Korea. I would like to share some of my experience and my reflections this evening.

First, the background. There's always background. There are a number of different ways that one can visit North Korea and a variety of channels to make that possible.

North Korea is still a tightly closed land, so that you have to have advanced approval from the right government agency. There's a special government agency that deals with South Korean citizens. There's a different one that works with overseas Koreans, that is those who are ethnically Korean but citizens of another country such as Canada or the US.

And there's a third channel for those who are not Korean in any way, shape or form. To go to North Korea, you have to be part of some group or program approved by one of these agencies. You may be an artist participating in the gigantic Spring Arts Festival in honor of Taeyang-jeol or Great Sun Day, the birthday of the great Suryong Kim Il-sung.

That was April 15th. Kim Il-sung is considered the great sun as in the sun that warms the earth, the great sun of all mankind. His birthday is celebrated much as Christmas is celebrated in other parts of the world.

There are colored lights and all sorts of decorations. There's a great emphasis on his birthplace, Mangyongdae. People receive gifts from the government in his honor, as if from him himself.

There are slogans everywhere. An especially common one is, the great Suryong, comrade Kim Il-sung, is with us eternally. In conjunction with his birthday, there is a large international arts festival.

Artists of all sorts are invited from all over the world to this festival, including overseas Koreans and non-Koreans. Another way that you may get to go is through an approved tour program set up for a special occasion, such as the Arirang Mass Games, a massive display of gymnastics and group displays dedicated to proclaiming the glories of North Korea, the revolution, and the leaders, Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il, the great general. I did not go through either of these channels.

My artistic abilities leave a bit to be desired, to say the least. If they ever want to showcase the world's worst artistic talent, I might be able to wrangle an invitation. No, the way I went to North Korea was with a Christian humanitarian organization.

There are a number of such organizations, some based in South Korea and some in the U.S., Canada, or elsewhere. The wonderful thing is that they are appreciated greatly by the North Koreans for the assistance that they provide. Because of the nature of their work, these groups are able to travel to parts of the country that most other people never see.

We were a team traveling to locations that had received aid over the past year to verify that they had received what had been sent, as well as determining what needs there were for the future. Our specific area of assistance was tuberculosis care. We traveled to TB hospitals and rest homes.

Because of the danger of contracting TB, the rest homes, long-term care facilities, are located in very remote places. This means that we traveled all over backcountry North Korea. At places, the only way we could distinguish the road from fields was by rows of white painted rocks to indicate where we should drive.

We drove through streams, between rice paddies, over hills, and up remote valleys. I loved it. When I went, it was early spring.

One of my earliest memories of Korea was the hills around our home south of Seoul back in the 50s. There were no trees to speak of, and it seemed that the hills were completely bare. However, come spring, they turned a beautiful purple as all the azaleas bloomed.

The red clay hills put on a springtime dress that all but dazzled the eyes, especially after the long, cold winter. The part of North Korea that we drove through was much like that. It really took me back.

I found myself quite nostalgic. It reminded me of where I lived way back then. Now those same hills are covered with apartment buildings, concrete, and asphalt, not a pine tree or azalea bush to be found.

As we made our way through the countryside, I saw a lot that reminded me of my childhood explorations in South Korea. People were preparing the fields for planting, laying out rice beds, plowing, and so forth. Oxen were in evidence everywhere.

I saw them plowing in the fields and pulling carts on the roads. There were also a lot of big North Korean-made tractors. On the roads, we also saw a lot of people on bicycles, often two to a bike.

As we drove along the roads through the towns and the countryside, people were usually very friendly, quickly responding to our smiles and waves with big ones of their own. Hopefully, even though we were not allowed to talk with any of the common folk, we were able to convey a bit of friendliness as both Americans and Christians. One of our vehicles had a big cross on the side in a reference to Christ.

I will have more to share next week, but before I finish tonight, I just want to tell you about one person that I met, who I consider to be a real hero. He was the director of one especially remote rest home. As we turned off the main paved highway onto a dirt track that we didn't even see until we got to it, we headed off through the hills toward this rest home.

Along the way, I happened to spot a beautiful cock pheasant standing beside the road. It was almost as if he was a spectator watching our convoy go by. It had been quite a while since I had seen such a magnificent bird standing erect in his red and green coat, the ring around his neck clearly visible.

I wondered if we would see more pheasant as we wound deeper into the countryside. As soon as we arrived at the rest home, we were ushered into the director's office, where tables were spread with refreshments for our enjoyment. There was an amazing variety, including peanuts, roasted chestnuts, baked sweet potatoes, cookies, candies, tangerines, apples, and so forth.

Along with the usual snacks, when we got to this particular rest home, we found to our pleasant surprise plates of boiled pheasant eggs, some 50 in all. I was very curious about these eggs. At one point in the conversation, I asked if they raised pheasants, thinking that that must be the way they were able to get so many eggs.

The director said they didn't, that he had collected the eggs for us in anticipation of our visit. I expressed my surprise at being able to get so many, and he admitted that he had spent four days tracking through the hills looking for nests. Four days! I was quite moved at this expression of his genuine appreciation for our team.

He was a dear, sweet soul. But that wasn't all. Knowing how dangerous and contagious tuberculosis is, especially if you contract the drug-resistant variety, I asked him if he were ever concerned for his health.

He revealed to us that he had served as director there for 14 years. During that period, he had contracted TB three times. This is not a minor ailment.

The drugs that he had had to take to cure it can be almost as bad as the sickness itself. He ran high temperatures, suffered great fatigue, and had to take powerful poisonous drugs over a period of months before he recovered. Once would have been bad enough, but three times? And he was still at it.

It was evident from his manner, his expressions of appreciation to us, and his reports that he cared deeply for his patients and his staff, 40% of whom had also gotten sick over the past 14 years. This man took his job seriously and cared about his people. This gentle, aging TB sanatorium director is truly a hero in my eyes.

Next week, I will share some more. That's it for now. Good night.

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