

21 - More Reflects on Trip to North Korea

by Ben Torrey

Ben Torrey shares his reflections on his trip to North Korea, highlighting the contrast between the dedicated individuals he met and the lack of hope and initiative in the society.

Duration: 8:36

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 13:12, Matthew 5:14, Romans 15:13

Topics: "North Korea"

Description

In this sermon, Ben Torrey reflects on his recent trip to North Korea and shares his new insights about the people and the socialist system in the country. He acknowledges that his previous understanding of North Korea was simplistic and that things are not black and white. He highlights the dedication and motivation of individuals he met, including government officials and healthcare professionals, who were working to improve their situation. Torrey also mentions the hospitality and appreciation shown by the staff at a remote and poor facility, but also observes the struggle with hopelessness in some places.

Transcript

Good evening once again. This is Ben Torrey with some more reflections on my recent trip to North Korea. Last week I left you with a story about a tuberculosis sanatorium director, someone that I consider to be a true hero.

Tonight I would like to explore my assumptions and experience in relation to the people of North Korea a bit. First, I should say that my basic understanding of North Korea and its socialist system has not changed, but I've come to realize that my perspective may have been a bit too simplistic. Things are not so black and white.

North Korea is a land where central planning and the socialist system undermine self-determination. People may be put in roles for which they are not adapted or may not like. A great emphasis is placed on the group, while the individual is de-emphasized.

This is also true of South Korea, but I believe it is much more so in the North. For instance, if you ask a North American, someone born and raised in mainstream North American culture, what the smallest unit of society is, 99% of the time he will say it is the individual. You ask a Korean the same question and he will tell you it is the family.

Is that not so? I'm not sure how a North Korean would answer that question. I'd like to find out, but it will be a collective answer. It may be the family, but it could be something else as well, such as the work group or the party.

In any case, it will not be the individual. Our team saw this by the way our questions were answered. The leader of our group wanted to bring back to supporters in the U.S. stories of how their support made a concrete difference.

We asked if there was someone who experienced a special benefit from the assistance. We were looking for case studies, if you will. Always, the answers we received were in general terms of collective benefit.

Real benefit, but much too general for our purposes. Rather than saying something like a doctor was able to get to a person who was seriously ill just in time to save him because he had a bicycle and didn't have to walk, we were told that the doctors were able to visit people and get to village clinics more easily because they had bicycles provided by the organization. Our team, all Americans, actually discussed how we could get individual stories, case histories.

We tried asking the questions in different ways, but never succeeded. It was very clear to us that they simply did not think in terms of individuals. Anyway, back to my earlier comments on what I understand about North Korean society and culture.

The system is designed such that the state or the larger organization has more influence on what a person does than the individual himself. There is little in the way of individual initiative. Difficult situations are simply accepted as the way things are.

People don't exert much effort to change things. I will talk about this a bit more in a moment. We traveled with and met a number of highly motivated and dedicated individuals who cared deeply about others.

Some were members of the elite class of society. Our guides were relatively high government officials responsible for different aspects of public health. Several of them had spent time working overseas or represented North Korea at international gatherings.

We met and spoke at length with hospital directors, rest home directors, and staff people. In all cases, we saw dedication and concern. These were good people who cared about their jobs and the people that they were responsible for.

It is possible, I was not able to inquire too deeply, that they had little choice about their jobs. Although I did learn that one person had been a construction worker and wanted to get involved in public health, so he applied to go to college and was able to change his field. I wish I knew more about how he was able to do that and whether or not it was difficult.

Perhaps I will have another opportunity to inquire. However that may be, my point is that regardless of whether or not most of these people had a choice about their careers, they exhibited great dedication and commitment, even to risking their own lives and health. Witness my story from last week of the rest home director who had contracted tuberculosis three times over the past 14 years and was still just as motivated as ever.

There are good, hard-working, dedicated men and women in North Korea working in very difficult situations with limited resources, striving to do their jobs well. Let us not forget that. On the other hand, I

saw real evidence that they struggle with hopelessness.

One truly remote rest home is a special example. You can drive to this one only when the tide is out. Otherwise you have to climb a hill and walk for about three hours to get there.

Fortunately for us, the tide was out. Our team later told us that when a team from the organization first made it there a few years ago, they had to walk. The place was quite dingy and run down.

The people seemed to be without much hope. The team brought them some material supplies and listened to what their needs were, promising to come back the next year. Before they returned, they sent some assistance.

When the team returned the next year, they found the rest home completely changed. The buildings had been repaired, there was fresh white paint everywhere, and the atmosphere was full of excitement. No, they hadn't received anything new.

But after the team's first visit, they were so encouraged that they all fell to work sprucing things up. All the new work had been done by the staff, and I think some of the patients as well. The fact that an American group, one that was also Christian, went to all the trouble to come see them, then followed through on their promise to send stuff, made all the difference.

Before that they lacked hope. Now they had it, and having it went to work with a will to improve their situation. When we visited this time, I was impressed with how clean and well-maintained everything was.

What really moved me, however, was the reception we received. We were invited into the director's office and given seats around a table laden with all sorts of refreshments. There were baked sweet potatoes, roast chestnuts, peanuts, tangerines, apples, cookies, crackers, and my favorite, dried persimmons.

Here we were, at what appeared to be a very remote and poor facility, yet the staff had outdone themselves to show their appreciation and hospitality. We saw this demonstrated numerous times. Ironically, the better-off hospitals were the skimpiest in their refreshments.

The biggest hospital that we visited, in Pyongyang too, only offered us tea. Speaking of hope and lack thereof, one thing that really got to me was that the hospital corridors had no lights in them. It wasn't just that they did not have lights.

There had been lights in the past, but I could see where the fixtures had been removed and the holes plastered over. Perhaps removing non-functioning fixtures made it easier to keep dust away. The hallways were very clean, but it spoke to me of a real lack of hope.

There's no electricity to speak of, so we might just as well not have the fixtures. Everywhere we went, people adapted to the situation by using flashlights and small candles. I saw no lamps anywhere.

When I was younger, we did not have electricity at Jesus Abbey, but we had kerosene and carbide lamps. We had plenty of light. I was told that in order to get light into the hallways of the hospitals, they left the outside doors and the doors to the rooms within the windows open, even in the winter.

In a different situation, in a different society, I am sure someone would have come up with some sort of better solution, but here lack of hope and lack of initiative were in evidence. This made me quite sad. I'll leave you with that thought tonight, but also the reminder that there are real heroes working in North

Korea.

Pray for them. Good night.

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