

**A Journey to Tunisia**  
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There aren't supposed to be any Christians in the Muslim country of Tunisia on North Africa's coast. Christianity there is so much a part of the distant past that it can be written off as something of archeological interest. In an attractive travel booklet one can read of beautiful mosaics depicting symbols of the Christian faith, carefully preserved and on display in the museums of Sfax, Sousse, Carthage, and Tunisia.

This beautiful location on the Mediterranean was once a very important part of the early Christian church. With its climate and location, the area belongs more to Europe than to Africa. It is isolated from black Africa by vast expanses of desert. And it has been isolated from Christians in the Western world, by a "Koranic curtain" for centuries.

The Muslim religion keeps such a firm grip on its people that legally there is no escape from the religion of one's birth. Any attempt to change brings suspicion and persecution. Inquirers into Christianity are considered traitors to their countries because state and religion are one. This Koranic curtain is every bit as strong as the "iron curtain" which separates us from the Communist bloc of countries.

But in the late 1900s the Arab world is coming into our focus. Through missionary radio, Muslims across North Africa are hearing and responding to the gospel. In the fall of 1977 my husband and I visited Tunisia on behalf of the Arabic broadcast of the Back to God Hour.

From the second century after our Lord until the time of Augustine in the fifth century, this country was the setting for a unique Christian culture. Here the first Christian literature was produced in Latin. There was a long line of brilliant writers, ending in Augustine.

Between A.D. 386 when he was converted until 430 when he died, Augustine wrote 1,000 books – equal to about 15 volumes of a standard encyclopedia. The searching thoughts of this early church father have exerted an incredible influence on our religious attitudes.

So what could have happened? Where did the Christians go? It's easy for us who have benefited from the Reformation to look with skepticism at a Christianity that couldn't withstand an Arab invasion. A glance at church history, however, would show such wars, persecutions, and heresies in Africa that we can learn something from it all.

Augustine was very concerned about various heresies and schisms in the church. In response to the needs of the time, Augustine elaborated many biblical doctrines which still are important to us today. For example, he emphasized the biblical doctrine of God's efficacious grace in bringing sinners to a living faith in Christ. These words from his famous confessions may be familiar: "O Lord, thou hast made us for thyself, and our souls can have no rest until they find their rest in thee."

With the death of Augustine and the coming of the Vandals, the North African church came under the influence of another heresy: Arianism. The Vandals brought with them a belief in a God who was “unknowable” and in a Jesus who was neither truly God nor truly man. The Muslim invasion 200 years later brought a similar belief in an unreachable God, and a holy book, the Koran, which placed Jesus in the position of a prophet inferior to Mohammed.

How does the traditional Muslim practice his religion? By fasting from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan (accompanied by a cessation of normal life and mounting irritation); daily prayers (five ritual prayers with seldom any thought of love in their hearts); giving of alms (to win merit in a sensual kind of heaven); and the reciting of the Creed “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet) (declaring a knowledge *about* God, but never the *knowing* which is ours). The Muslim idea of marriage and of women is so distorted that we could not bear to hear the sum total of misery which it has produced.

Do Tunisian Muslims welcome the gospel now? That is like saying: would a prisoner like to be free?

Yes, many who can listen to the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ recognize it as the best news they have ever heard. But – and this is such a giant consideration – one step toward Christ means one step toward persecution.

One wonders if any part of the world has seen more continuous persecution of Christians than the countries of North Africa. First, there was the Roman persecution which went on with varying ferocity for almost 200 years. It is possible to stand in the center of the arena in which two Christian women, Perpetua and Felicitia, were thrown to lions. We honor their memory, and they symbolize to us the early Tunisian converts who were willing to be martyred for their faith.

Persecutions continue. There may be no visible church or no Christians that you could count on a census day, yet in the past hundred years there have been Christians who have been martyred. The diligent work of a few dedicated missionaries bore fruit. They can tell you of many converts who were beaten mercilessly, poisoned, or murdered for their faith. They were confident of the promises of God and overwhelmed by what Christ had done for them.

It is hard for us who live in freedom to imagine what it must be like to risk death for taking a stand as a Christian. The fact that people are willing to be martyred should tell us something about the terrible darkness in which they are living and what the gospel means to them.

Today by means of radio we are making the gospel available to many who long for the freedom to follow Christ. We are providing daily spiritual food which they need. Rejoice that we can penetrate the Koranic curtain! And pray that the God of Augustine will reclaim North Africa.