

From Hate to Love

Testimony of Johannes Vogel, Director of the Bibel-Center in Breckerfeld, Germany

"Behold, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness; but in love you have delivered my life from the pit of destruction, for you have cast all my sins behind your back."
(Isaiah 38:17)

I grew up in a Christian home; both my father and mother were Christian. My memories stem from the time when my great-grandmother was still alive. My paternal ancestors belonged to the (very conservative) Brethren, and many of them were evangelists and travelling preachers. My great-grandmother married into this family – she was half Jewish. I remember my father telling me how she would sit him in her lap when he was a child and tell him stories from the Bible about her nation, she meant the people of Israel, and how God took care of them. One of her sons, Fritz Vogel, was my grandfather. During WW I he found employment with the local police, but lacking an education was limited in his career options and consequently struggled to provide an income for his wife and their three children. As members of a Brethren assembly, they brought their worries and needs before God.

Germany faced a bleak future at that time, following defeat during the First World War and the political division and economic depression which ensued. Then an Austrian with revolutionary ideas entered Germany. Born in the Austrian town of Braunau am Inn, Adolf Hitler promised the German people a lot, and his party – the "Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei" (National-Socialistic German Labor Party, or NSDAP) – quickly gained popularity. The influence and power of this "saviour" of the German people grew rapidly. Grandpa Fritz, along with many others, was deceived by Hitler and believed in his promises. Indeed, they were blind and did not see his evil ways. The only thing they saw was their opportunity to achieve and advance, but they gave no thought to the terrible things which Hitler was proclaiming and planning, in particular the extinction of the Jewish race.

Many Christians supported Hitler, who was soon elected President of Germany. Such support cannot be explained in purely rational terms; something demonic was happening! Grandpa Fritz joined the Nazi party during its formative years, and prospered in a way that would not have otherwise been possible at that time. He even joined the "Schutzstaffel" (SS), which in turn enabled him to advance to the rank of local Chief of Police in the city of Hagen. Over time, he became a very influential person in the city. To this day I cannot understand how a person whose mother was half Jewish could have become a member of the SS, but the Nazi movement was a corrupt system, full of intrigue and power-struggles. They made people totally denying their Jewish roots.

On November 9th, 1938, Jewish synagogues, shops and other properties were desecrated during Kristallnacht – the Night of Broken Glass. My grandpa was the first to set fire to the Jewish synagogue of Hagen, which burned to the ground. My father, who was 9 years old at the time, remembered that night very well. He remembered grandpa coming home early the next morning smelling horribly of smoke, and seeing his singed gloves by the door. My dad was a member of the "Hitler Jugend" (the Hitler Youth Movement), and my grandpa was so blinded, and to a certain extent crazy, that he made my dad join the SS, furnishing him with a special kid-size SS uniform. There is even a picture of my dad, as youngest SS-member, shaking the hands of Joseph

Goebbels, who was the Reich Minister of Propaganda of Germany. It astonishes me that people who confessed to be Christians could be so blind and deceived by one man. Both my grandparents had a picture of the Führer in their home, and they prayed daily for him. They believed it was Hitler who provided them with work, food, and security. But since at least on 10th November, 1938, everyone knew what did happen in the night by reading the newspaper. Therefore nobody had an excuse in not knowing what was going on. In fact, everyone who did not stand up for this crime became complicit in the crime against Jews. (Unfortunately Germany has not learnt from the past. At the moment we are witnessing a shift to the right that is alarming indeed. We are not far away from what was once.)

Adolf Hitler captured the minds of Germany's youth by instilling in them a feeling of national pride, and by alienating them from their parents by convincing them that obedience to the State took precedence over obedience to their mothers and fathers. (To this day it is still a problem for us Germans to show national pride because of our history. Only since the 2006 soccer world championship, which was hosted in Germany, has it become more acceptable for people to display or parade a German flag.) During the Nazi era, the highest honour a young man could achieve was to follow and obey "The Leader" (the Führer). When my father Friedrich was drafted near the end of the war at the age of 15, he wanted to help "The Leader" achieve "the final victory."

Grandpa Fritz received special orders from the SS to serve in Holland because of his expertise in foreign languages. Many people in the Dutch underground movement were to die, including Englishmen who were fooled by my grandpa's perfect command of the Dutch language. Grandpa advanced in his career and was appointed supervisor of the Concentration Camp (German abbr. KZ) in Esterwegen, near the German-Dutch border. This camp was not a death camp (there were no gas chambers) but a labour camp. Thanks be to God that Hitler lost the War. My grandpa was captured and became a prisoner of war (POW) in Russia, which undoubtedly saved his life. Sentenced to death by the Dutch and the English, his sentence was later quashed because he had served time as a POW. It was during his time in a Russian prison that he made a new beginning with Jesus Christ by repenting of his wrongdoings. One of his fellow prisoners was a faithful pastor. The prisoners had no access to Bibles, but this pastor knew many scriptures and hymns by heart and led my grandpa back to the Lord. One verse in particular made an impact on him:

"Behold, for peace I had great bitterness..." (Isaiah 38:17 – KJV).

My grandpa was not the only member of my family to be imprisoned at the end of the War. The American forces captured my father and arranged to have him deported to the stone quarries in France at the coast. This would almost certainly have meant the end of my father, because not a single person from his unit ever returned. However, God spared his life, using my grandma to rescue him. Grandma went to the market square where the deportation to France was to take place. When she arrived, she simply walked past the guards and took hold for her 16-years old son by the ears. The guard on duty asked her what she was doing and ordered her to stop, but grandma replied: "He is still going to kindergarten." She then shouted at my dad before slapping him across the cheeks. The soldier laughed and said, "Go home to your kindergarten." Once again, God's hand was on my father.

After the War my father became the manager of an estate. With my grandpa still being held as a POW in Russia, he also had to help take care of his two younger brothers. In time my dad became a chain smoker and a womanizer. Several years later, however, an American evangelist organized a series of tent revival meetings in Hagen. One of the posters read: “No one gets by Jesus.” In the midst of the rubble of war, my father surrendered his life to God. Back home, along with his then returned father (Grandpa Fritz), he knelt down and surrendered his life completely to Jesus Christ. From then on he followed the Lord – no more smoking, no more drinking, no more dancing, no more womanizing.

My father met my mother at the Evangelical Free Church in Hagen and they were married on November 20th, 1951. Shortly after their wedding my dad contracted a very active and infectious form of tuberculosis, which resulted in him spending almost three years at various clinics and hospitals. In those days tuberculosis was an incurable disease. Despite his condition my dad said that these three years were his most valuable, because he developed a strong desire to serve God as a missionary, something which was medically impossible because of his ill health. Nevertheless, the elders of his church, along with an American missionary, prayed for him, and my father was completely healed. My mother, however, did not share my father’s desire to attend Bible school.

Towards the end of my father’s illness, on October 5th, 1953, their first son Friedhelm was born. “So, we really can’t attend a Bible school, now that we have a son”, said my mother, but precisely three months later, on January 5th, 1954, God took Friedhelm home. At his graveside, my mother found her “yes” for serving the Lord, and in September 1954 she and my father enrolled on a two-year Bible school course in Switzerland. It was during that time that they began to feel a burden for Israel and the Jewish people. The director of the Bible school in Switzerland, Saturnin Wasserzug, was Jewish, and both he and his wife Gertrud had a clear biblical position towards Israel, making it clear to their students how important it was for Christians to love the Jewish people. My dad was captivated by this, and soon developed a deep love for God’s people.

On July 28th, 1956, my parents founded the Bibelschule Hagen (Bible school Hagen) in their home town. The school began with evening classes, until a full-time residential program was developed. In 1978, the school relocated to nearby Breckerfeld and changed its name to the Bibel-Center Freie Theologische Fachschule Breckerfeld (Bible Centre, Free Theological Vocation School). The love for Israel which we have as a school has deepened over the years and is reflected in our school logo, which merges the Bible with the menorah lampstand because of the centrality of Israel in the Scriptures. My father started offering tours to Israel so that people could appreciate the land and the people. He himself visited Israel approximately 120 times, and in appreciation was awarded the distinction of Special Citizen of Jerusalem.

When looking back to its beginnings, we can recount miracle after miracle. It all started with about 400 square feet of land, and today the school is still expanding, now with six buildings. In August 2012, by God’s grace, our new conference hall, named the Jerusalem-Hall, was opened – perhaps not impressive by American standards, but for us it is a sign of God’s grace, love, and faithfulness. There have been many miracles which have testified to God’s care and provision. For example, there have been times

when we had nothing to eat, but we prayed, and God sent someone our way to give us food.

In 1986 we wanted to do something special to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Bible school, something which would demonstrate our belief in the centrality of the Bible, evangelism, and Israel. We decided to build a full-scale replica of the Tabernacle, following the detailed instructions and dimensions laid down in Scripture. The final exhibit, which we named "Expo Exodus," toured Germany and other parts of Europe and about 250,000 visitors came to see it. In 1999 the Tabernacle was purchased by the Southern Baptists in America and relocated to the Negev desert near Eilat in Israel. The Southern Baptists have a church there and thus the Tabernacle became a tool for ministering people from different countries and religious backgrounds, both natives and tourists. There are daily guided tours through the Old Testament's Sanctuary. It is a great chance that people get to know Jesus. Here we see clearly how the Bible and Israel go hand in hand with each other. That is what our logo shows. One cannot separate them.

But why exactly do I love Israel? First of all God had chosen Israel and made it to be his treasured possession ever since (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). But why did God choose Israel? Because of love (V. 8). Love is something that is hard to explain reasonably. It was and is still his superior decision. Therefore, I respect His decision, I believe it and I want to love what God loves. So, here are three reasons for my love towards God's people and the Promised Land:

1. "Thanks to" Israel we have the Bible

The Bible is a Jewish book. All its authors were Jewish except Luke. Furthermore, the scrolls of Qumran were found in Israel. I am convinced that God himself had hidden His word in His land. He had determined the date when these scrolls were to be found: on 29th November 1947. Exactly on that very day the UN agreed with the Plan as Resolution 181 (II). That meant Israel got his own land, because of a two-state-solution. While travelling today through Israel one can experience the reliability of the Bible.

2. The redeemer came from Israel

Christianity was born in Israel. Israel is the „cradle“ of the gospel. Jesus was a Jew; he had Jewish ancestors (Romans 9:5). He was born in Bethlehem, he died, he rose and he was taken up into heaven in Jerusalem – in the capital city of Israel.

3. "Thanks to" Israel we are able to understand God's plan

Israel will play its part in the future. God's plan to save the world is tied inseparably to the history of Israel. The Bible in my right hand and the newspapers in my left hand reveals God's schedule for the Middle East and Israel. God is true to his promises for Israel. The Messiah will return to build up His kingdom – in Israel.

"The LORD bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life! May you see your children's children! Peace be upon Israel!" (Psalm 128;5-6)

Zion is God's dwelling place (Isaiah 24:23) in the Millennium. So, Israel is not only important for the past and the present but also for the future. We, as the church, are ingrained with God's people. We cannot pretend to have nothing to do with Israel.

God only blesses the one who blesses Israel (Genesis 12:3). Therefore, we shall love, pray for and bless Israel.

In conclusion, I can honestly say that God changed my family – from utmost hatred of the Jewish people to the deepest love for them through the Jew Jesus. Forgiveness is possible only through the Jewish Messiah, Jeschua Ha-Maschiach, whose love is more powerful than man’s hatred. Only Jesus can transform hatred into love, a love which my father received and which was shown through him and my family to the many Jewish people who came to our home over the years.

To God alone be the glory!

Maranatha!