

JUSTICE ⁺the INNER LIFE

a CAFO podcast

Episode 9: Maggie Gobran

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Jedd Medefind:

As I've shared before, I spent the year just after college living and working with local Christians in many parts of the world – from Central America to Asia, Russia to Africa. As I got to be part of the daily lives of these believers and heard their stories, I was so struck by how *every part* of the church around the world has unique *gifts* to give each other. We truly need each other – to encourage, to challenge, to see God and His work more clearly. At the same time, each of us has unique blind spots, too, so we also need each other to help us notice things that our own sub-culture misses.

To receive those gifts, we must learn from and listen to our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. That grows and refines us, even when we might see things a bit differently.

That's one reason I felt it was such a privilege to get to talk with Maggie Gobran at the recent CAFO Summit. She's known to many as "Mama Maggie" of Cairo. Imagine an elderly Middle Eastern woman, dressed all in simple, flowing white. Beautiful eyes sparkle from a wrinkled face. Her voice is gentle, sometimes almost inaudible, so you need to lean in to hear what she has to say. She was raised in privilege in Egypt, got a PhD, became a professor. But God dramatically changed the direction of her life when she encountered Him in Scripture and in children living in Cairo's garbage dumps.

Mama Maggie has been faithfully serving those kids for decades now – surrounded by both physical need, as well as waves of religious persecution. But she hasn't merely persevered. When we were together, it was so clear that her heart was full of love and delight and gentleness, even when many things she encounters every day seem to point in the opposite direction.

When you see someone like that, you want to know, "What makes them tick?" And what can she teach me about following Jesus in really hard places.

I'm here with Maggie Gobran, known to countless children and many others around the world as Mama Maggie. Mama Maggie, welcome to Justice in the Inner Life.

Mama Maggie: Thank you.

Jedd Medefind: Well, Mama Maggie, you are often referred to as the Mother Theresa of Cairo, you have been nominated for the Nobel prize many times, and you spend most of your days serving children in the garbage slums of Cairo. Yet, I know your life began in a very different way, that you ... I know you faced some persecution as a Christian in the Middle East. You also had a fairly affluent childhood, and you became a professor at the American University, so what changed the direction of your life so dramatically?

Mama Maggie: I would like to thank everyone who is really praying and trying to help someone who is in need because a great reward will be waiting for all of you, so thank you Jedd. Do you know, we are not the ones who are choosing in many cases where to be or when to die, but we are choosing either to be people with the mission, with meaning, with depth, or just let your life go without meaning, without purpose. As soon as I found children in need, I saw it with my eyes, I felt my inner eyes were open, that even I loved God for many years, but I didn't take this step without his grace.

All of a sudden, I felt I cannot go on doing what I'm doing. I need to do something for them. My eyes were open because of his grace. If you think or for it, think of all that is good and pure and just and true, and this you will all will think, when you look at this children eyes, you can see Jesus eyes looking at you. This is the miracle, the real miracle, that if we listen from inside, he will do the change. I didn't do anything on my own. I didn't sacrifice anything. I just feel he took me step by step, so it all goes to my God.

Jedd Medefind: It's all a gift.

Mama Maggie: Yeah, it is.

Jedd Medefind: What has been the hardest part of this journey? You have ... The world heads in a very different direction, they prioritize comfort and safety and things being easy, and you have headed in the opposite direction into places of hurt and need. What do you feel like in that has weighed heavily upon you?

Mama Maggie: There is a good say that says, "The one who's intending to go into the ministry should be prepared for all challenges, all kind of challenges," and that was exactly what God showed me, that it's not a playtime, it's not a game, it's not something that I can go for a certain time and then change my direction. It's a lifetime commitment, and as long as he's there, then I have the strength and the joy to continue for whatever it takes.

Jedd Medefind: Are there particular habits that you have formed, practices that you have chosen over the years that you feel have been important in sustaining you along this journey?

Mama Maggie: Yes. For those who knew me before going to the poor, they know how much I've changed from outside, but the reality that I have changed from inside because when I was shocked from what I've seen, I came back home and started reading the Bible on regular basis. So I don't think any human could make it without the Bible on regular basis. It's like a habit that goes before eating, before I take my breakfast or lunch or dinner that I give my spirit the chance to have the real need with God, because without that, it can easily be or not.

Jedd Medefind: Tell us a little bit about your practice of solitude. I know you have shared about that before as an important part of your life, and I think a lot of people would think of that as something that's very separate from work like you do, of justice and mercy, and so the idea of going into times of solitude, tell us first of all why you see that as so important.

Mama Maggie: I cannot say how important it is for me, and maybe for many of those who are going into the ministry, because when you listen to God, you need to take time away and say, "I'm serious. I really love you. I want you to pour your love in me. Otherwise, I don't know how to love." So number one is to set some time alone, no matter how busy you are. I know everyone is busy, but this time will multiply your fruit, so if you want fruit, you go to solitude to find some time alone with God because there, you can take what you need.

I started to give a couple of hours every day, and then maybe a couple of days every week, and then it started to grow more and more. Spent like 40 days every year by myself because when you go through the Bible, you know that if you really want to have the life that God is choosing for you, give him the chance to speak clearly. Give him his Holy Spirit to work in you, to change you. How can you find out your own faults if you don't have silent time and review? How can you be ready for your enemy when he attacks or make a trap for you? How can you have victory in life without taking the power from him? God is so good. God is so mighty. God is so great. So if we do something without God, I don't think we will succeed. If we do anything with God, this is the real success.

Jedd Medefind: Tell us just a little bit about what you do while you are in these times away, maybe going back in time, when you were first starting and you came to love this time alone, and maybe you'd spend one day or two days doing this, because I think for many people it sounds strange and maybe even a little bit scary to be alone with yourself and God for even 24 hours, so how would you explain to them how to enter into that for the first time?

Mama Maggie: Just compare it with eternity. Is it scary there? You are going to stand alone in front of him. No one can say anything. So if I'm not getting used to this and looking at him and learning from him directly, where am I going to eternity? How can I spend millions of years with him like that? So we just need to ask him, "Give us the strength, a time, and your Holy Spirit to teach us, what is it to be with you?" Then you find that you are really falling in love with him.

You know and I know, he is the only one who love us in a way no human could afford to love us like him, so how ... We are created to be with God, and we are trying to do everything to be away from God. It's not right. Always, we'll have a vacancy in your heart, in your mind, in your life until he will come and fill it, so just give him a chance to fill it. When you are with him, take your Bible because you talk and listen, you talk and listen. If you want to love him more, talk to him more. Get to know him more. It's the time between you and your Bible and him.

Jedd Medefind: Amen. I feel like I'm towards the front end of the journey you're describing, just in maybe the last decade I've begun to do time alone with the Lord, and it has at times felt scary because our lives are so full of activity. It's like you're almost ... especially in the west, but I imagine in Egypt too at times, you're a professor of computer science, the technology has invaded our lives. There's activity, there's noise, and so to suddenly be away from that can feel like you're going through withdraws, like you've almost gone off of a drug that you were used to. Yet, I've also experienced what you're describing, that as the noise quiets, as the spinning slows down, that there is an experience in the presence of God that you simply can't find amidst the noise of daily life.

Mama Maggie: Thank you for sharing that because it is like a treasure for everyone. Everyone can start to think this way and take it. You think, "What am I losing leaving my technology away for a day?" At the beginning, it won't be easy. You won't have the full of joy, but when you keep doing it, it's like heaven is opening and you begin to feel the spirit around you. You can see it doesn't need to be physically, but it is with your heart and mind that you can see the angels who are spirits around the Lord, and you can sing with them, and you can praise him. You find many of the problems, he took care of it because you honored him truly.

Jedd Medefind: Mama Maggie, do you feel like these practices, some of that you've mentioned, the time in scripture each day and in the presence of God each morning, in prayer, and these extended times in solitude, do you feel they're especially critical for people who are facing persecution in a place like the Middle East that I know some of your dear friends and others have faced such significant things?

Mama Maggie: Yes. When you think from where you get this to accept only the injustice, all the tough time, all the warfare of the enemy, I think the enemy number one challenge, when a believer takes time away with his Bible and his God. He wants to stop this by any means, and because he knew that this is how we can be more than conqueror. We are in him so any attack will come to him, not to me. Yes, I do have a heart. I do cry for the people who are suffering, but still, he is the one who's protecting everyone. He is in control. He knows what he's allowing. He is allowing all this tough time so that when we can grow and become stronger in our faith. We welcome the challenges now. It's tough, but when he is there, we know he will do something about it.

Jedd Medefind: What counsel would you give to someone who is just starting out in work of justice and mercy, they want to continue for a lifetime? This is not just something they want to do for a month or a year, but they want to persevere,

as you have for decades. What advice and counsel would you give them about habits or practices or things that are important for them to incorporate and include from the very start?

Mama Maggie: When we were just starting, a Godly man told me one advice and he left. He said, "Don't ever give up," and that was true. If you are serious about it, if you are receiving it from the Lord and you feel his grace is with you, don't ever think to change it til the last breath in your life. I think this is very important because it's not like a short time mission, like you go for a couple of weeks or a couple of years. It's your life, so it's worth all what you're going to invest in it. Keep the vision in front of you all the time when you know that God will honor your commitment, and in heaven you will see great rewards from his glory. You share his glory.

I think this worthwhile putting everything we can. There are few steps, I think you can find it in every book here or everywhere you want, like stick to be at the top. T for trust, trust God, trust him doing his work through you. Trust your people, and O for being organized. You have to be organized every step. That's why if you are good organized in your Bible reading and your quiet time, you guarantee at the end that you will go to the end. P for positive because positive means believing. When there is a will, there is a way. Nothing is impossible. Even if I lose my own self, God will reward for that. So there are some steps that are clear, I think, to everyone who's taking it serious. The commitment is the most important in my understanding. To enjoy being committed and renewing your commitment every day, it means you are something from inside, not only that is out of the ministry.

Jedd Medefind: Mama Maggie, what I very much appreciate about you is not just that you have persevered through these decades, but that your eyes still sparkle. How does that happen? How does one go through all the things that you have gone through and your eyes still sparkle like that?

Mama Maggie: I feel I didn't even begin because I read about people of faith who really went a long ways. I pray that one day, like you have mentioned because you're so humble, that I ask God to allow me to start loving him the way I should.

Jedd Medefind: Amen. Thank you.

Mama Maggie: Thank you.

Jedd Medefind: Yeah.

Mama Maggie: God bless you.

Jedd Medefind:

Well, Mama Maggie says she feels she's just *beginning* to love God the way she'd want to. So, no wonder so many of us, at our very best, feel the same. But what a gift to get this little glimpse of a life that seeks after Jesus in all she does— in Scripture, in solitude and silence and prayer, and also in serving amidst the noise and smells and hurt of Cairo's garbage dumps.

These commitments aren't opposite. They are intertwined. They depend on one another. As Mama Maggie's life shows, we can only pour ourselves out day after day when we go to God to be filled day after day.

If we hope to go the distance — not burn up or flare out before we've run our full race — but continue to serve with bright eyes and light hearts, like Mama Maggie does, that always has to come first.