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‘Will I survive this hell?’:
Life inside a North Korean prison camp

The story of a Christian imprisoned in North Korea

A dangerous book
Why the Bible is a book that can put your life in danger in North Korea—and how Christians read God’s Word, anyway

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Will we see ourselves, even in the people behind bars?

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About Open Doors
For over 60 years, Open Doors has worked in the world’s most oppressive countries, empowering Christians who are persecuted for their faith.

Open Doors Core Values
We are part of the Body of Christ;
a people-to-people people
We are persecuted church-driven
We are people of the Bible
We are people of prayer
We live and work by faith
We are devoted to Jesus Christ and His commission
We are motivated solely for the glory of God

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Presence magazine showcases the powerful stories of faith of persecuted Christians, while showing how God is at work through the united Body of Christ around the world.
This is an awakening!

The church in China in 2021

By Julia Warren

Ruth Zhao* was a performer in the Chinese military’s Cultural and Performance Division. She was famous for her performances, winning awards year after year.

But recently, everything changed. Ruth’s boss told her she must stop going to church meetings and abandon her faith, as military personnel in China are not allowed to be Christians.

Ruth was faced with a life-changing decision: Deny her faith, stay in the army and keep her reputation; or declare her love for the Lord, and risk everything.

Ruth knew she could not deny her faith. Her boss tried repeatedly to get his star employee to leave Jesus—but Ruth knew it was time to leave the military.

Her resignation infuriated Ruth’s boss. He punished her by stripping her of all awards and accolades, and drastically reduced the retirement benefits she had accrued over many years. Ruth lost her job, her reputation and her financial security.

Ruth knew she couldn’t do anything about it. She had paid the price of standing strong in her faith in Jesus in China.

Persecution on the rise in China

Ruth is just one of the believers in China whose lives have been completely changed by the persecution against Christians, which has been steadily rising under the current Chinese regime.

One of the ways ordinary Christians are experiencing this rise in persecution is at their places of work. Christians who openly follow Jesus and share their faith can be singled out for harsh treatment, as Ruth experienced.

Churches have also felt intensifying pressure since new regulations governing religion were implemented with greater force in 2018. The government is actively targeting unregistered house churches to “invite” them for registration—otherwise, they are illegal and may be raided.

*Representative names and images used for security reasons
“Raids happen quickly,” says Caleb*, an Open Doors worker. “Some churches have been shut down. One was located in a five-story building in a small city. The church took up two floors of the building and had enough seating for 200 brothers and sisters. This venue was raided, shut down and sealed off. The authorities came inside and smashed all the equipment. New renovations were also destroyed. The church was closed and bolted from the outside. The believers were devastated.”

Restrictions, pressure, warnings and, sometimes, surprise raids—these are all part of Christian life for Chinese Christians in 2021. Pastors and co-workers regularly debate the pros and cons of registering their church with the government, and the risks and consequences they will face if they refuse to register and continue as unregistered house churches.

As far as the authorities are concerned, the fewer churches there are, the better. Fewer churches mean less work for them. From the outset, the government’s goal has always been to cripple the church to where it becomes weak and hidden from the public eye.

To avoid detection and closure, Christians move from venue to venue, staying fluid. Many house churches have simply downsized into smaller groups that meet in believers’ homes.

Caleb shares: “I would say, most of the churches persevered in these difficult situations without any pushback against the authorities. When big meetings are not allowed, they just meet in small groups. Counter actions to fight back directly are rare. The older leaders and believers who went through decades of persecution were frustrated in the beginning, but they bounce back quickly and stand firm in their faith.

“The younger ones who became Christians in the last 10 years or so tend to be more shocked. It will probably take longer for them to get used to the harsh environment, and accept this as the new normal in the years to come.”

Strengthening the Chinese church
This year marks the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. “We anticipate the government will exert even stronger control over all aspects of society for the sake of stability,” Caleb says. “Local churches will have to stay very low profile, and be more adaptive and creative in the way they do meetings and ministries.”

It is against this backdrop that Open Doors has moved quickly to strengthen the persecuted church through persecution preparedness training, small group discipleship training, youth ministry and youth leadership training, and presence ministry.

Your prayers and support are helping Open Doors to provide this practical training to equip believers in China as they prepare for rising persecution. Peony*, the director of Open Doors’ work in China, says, “It is vital that we stand with Chinese believers during this difficult season, to encourage them and strengthen their faith.”

Caleb adds, “It is our mission to help the churches rediscover their precious spiritual heritage. We want to see Christians in China stand firm and strong under persecution through God’s grace and power. We want to see a vibrant, persevering church that will not bow to the enemy’s schemes. This is our dream.”

Chinese churches have responded by asking Open Doors to journey with them.

“This is an awakening! Thank you so much for this great learning opportunity,” one sister shared after attending training from Open Doors. Her husband had been imprisoned for distributing Bibles in the past, and she had experienced persecution on many occasions. “I used to experience a lot of persecution. While my life has become stable, my spirit has become less alert. This training is very timely. It’s time for us to prepare, as persecution is escalating in different areas in China. I will pass on my learning to other brothers and sisters.”

Please join us in continuing to stand with our brothers and sisters in China in 2021 and beyond!
Pastor Nihal* touched his forehead in disbelief, his eyes wide with excitement. “The children were so happy,” he told us. “You should have seen the looks on their faces!”

In the midst of the COVID-19 economic crisis, Open Doors’ local partners extended relief aid to families of pastors and other believers most affected by the strict lockdown in Sri Lanka. But we knew we could do something even more special for the kids in the Christian community.

With your generous help, local churches were able to give children special care packages of cookies, chocolates and powdered milk.

“I have never seen them so happy!” Pastor Nihal exclaimed. “Some of those children had not tasted milk in years because their parents can’t afford it.”

One church was able to provide special packages for 43 children—and reach out to the Tamils, a Hindu people group often looked down upon and ostracized by their Buddhist village. Pastor Rajeev*, who leads a church in a neighboring town, has attempted to reach the Tamils for six years.

“I had a deep longing to do something for the Tamil children, but our church wasn’t able to financially,” he says. “I had been asking God to open a door for us to help these children when I received a call from your organization.”

The generosity has softened the Tamil parents’ attitudes toward the church.

“For the first time, one woman came to us and asked us to pray for her. Now her family attends church every week,” Pastor Rajeev says.

And the goodwill has also built relationships with local authorities. When the church began their ministry, police told Rajeev they would not provide protection. But when officers saw the church helping the children, they told Rajeev he now has their support.

Rajeev is so grateful: “Thank you for helping us do something for the children.”

Mexico: Christians get Bible in their native language

God’s Word does not return to Him empty! For the first time, Christians in the Mexico community of Peña Chavarico have Bibles in their native language of Tzeltal.

Through your support, Open Doors purchased and bought copies for this community. Our partners on the ground in Mexico delivered the Bibles to our brothers’ and sisters’ open hands.

Pray God’s Word spreads outward from this community, and that the seeds planted would grow in fertile soil.

*Representative names and images used for security reasons
Indian youth: ‘You stood by me in my desperate situation’

Meet Nikhil*, an 18-year-old believer from India. He came to faith after hearing about Jesus from a pastor. Here, Nikhil shares his story and gratitude in his own words:

“Everything about Jesus touched me and it seemed He was all I needed in my life. Secretly, I began attending a church though I was soon discovered. People informed my family, and they hated me for it.

“During the COVID-19 lockdowns, my family’s hatred for me grew. My brothers beat me, and my father told me: ‘Nikhil, you have brought complete shame to my name in the village. Leave my house and go stay with the Christians.’”

“I was able to go and stay in the church, and my pastor gave me some food, but he didn’t have much because of the lockdown. You provided for us! I thank God so much for my pastor and all of you who supported me. My own family disowned me, but now you are my family. You stood by me in my desperate, painful situation. I am so grateful.”

—Nikhil

A spiritual revolution in Iran

For years, we’ve heard about the growth of Christianity in Iran. A new report finds 1.5 percent of Iran’s population claims Christianity as their faith. That’s more than 1 million believers in a closed country that severely persecutes Christians.

The statistics and reports from our ministry partners inside the closed country reveal a growing spiritual revolution in Iran. Our partners in these areas have heard and shared repeated accounts of God’s hand moving and Muslims coming to Christ. The Iranian house church movement is reaching the next generation with the gospel.

Previous remarks from an Islamic seminary leader in one of Iran’s major cities also testifies to the growing influence of Christianity: Ayatollah Alavi Boroujerdi commented that “accurate reports indicate the youth are becoming Christians in Qom and attending house churches.” Qom is the country’s epicenter for Islamic studies.

“To say a spiritual revolution is happening in Iran is quite an understatement!” says Rev. Dr. Sasan Tavassoli, a convert in Iran.

The study’s findings reveal Iran’s general population is not on board with the government’s hardliner views against religious minorities. Almost 70 percent of respondents said they didn’t believe religious rulings should be enforced. Some 41 percent said they believe members of all faiths ought to be able to propagate their views. Only 5 percent said this right should be afforded solely to Muslims.

“If we remain faithful to our calling, our conviction is that it is possible to see the nation transformed within our lifetime,” an Iranian house church leader shared. “Because Iran is a strategic gateway nation, the growing church in Iran will impact Muslim nations across the Islamic world.”

Pray for the growing house church movement in Iran and the church leaders Iran’s government is working to force out of the country.

Your support strengthened a future leader of the Church.

Pray with young believers who are disowned by their families for following Christ.

Your support is growing and strengthening Iranian house churches.
Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, these believers in northeastern Bangladesh took the brave step of publicly professing their faith.

“It was a blessed moment for our church,” says Peter*, an Open Doors partner. “People were baptized in February this year, and more were waiting to be baptized when the country went into lockdown.”

The local church that baptized the women reports they have seen more and more Christians come to know the Lord and choose to be baptized.

Some of the new believers came to faith after attending an Open Doors adult literacy program, which uses the Bible to teach reading. The classes give people a vital skill for improving their lives and the confidence to share Scripture and the gospel with others.

Two Bangladeshi sisters, Dewanti and Mayna, were some of the first women to attend the literacy program in that area. The sisters had first moved to the village in 2017, where they met a believer named Brother Simon* who shared the gospel with them.

For persecuted believers, baptism is a courageous act of worship. Their actions can, and often do, trigger discrimination, pressure to renounce their faith and even violence for leaving their community’s religion.

To celebrate their decision, Open Doors gave each woman a Bible. Now they can read the Word of God on their own and draw strength from His promises when trials come. Pray with these new family members. Pray they will continue to grow strong in their faith and be salt and light to their community.

15 new believers baptized in Bangladesh

Believer in Laos emboldened by Bible training

Khambang* ran for his life three times. Now he’s back to building God’s Kingdom.

While the Lao government says citizens can believe and practice any form of religion, the reality is different for Christians, especially those living in remote villages. Too frequently, believers are disowned, displaced, beaten and imprisoned for their faith. In many cases, they must run for their lives.

This is what happened to Khambang*, a believer from central Laos. He was forced to flee for his life because he boldly shared the gospel in his community. Now, five years after his last escape, Khambang isn’t running anymore. He attended a Bible school supported by Open Doors, where he learned to prepare for persecution and felt the encouragement of many believers with a similar story.

Now he’s back to passionately preaching the Word of God and leading people to Christ. He recently shared the gospel with a young Buddhist couple who prayed with him to receive Jesus.

Remember Khambang and this new brother and sister—pray they stay faithful and emboldened.

*Representative names and images used for security reasons
Iranian couple’s daughter taken from them—because they follow Jesus

Iran’s hostility toward Christians who have converted from Islam continues to reach unimaginable depths. Late last year, a Christian husband and wife were told by Iran’s courts that they were “unfit” to be the parents of the baby girl they adopted over 18 months ago—simply because they are not Muslims.

The devastating decision against Sam Khoosravi and wife, Maryam Falahi, will remove their child, Lydia, from them and place her in foster care. Lydia has special health challenges, and the judge admitted there was “zero chance” she would be adopted by a new family.

In Iran’s eyes, baby Lydia is a Muslim because the courts assume she was originally born to a Muslim woman. By law, she must be cared for by Muslim parents. Reportedly, the verdict was likely influenced by Iran’s government—another “clear example of the lack of independence of the judiciary in cases involving Christians,” says Article 18 Advocacy Director Mansour Borji.

To make matters worse, Sam and Maryam are also battling their own court cases. Sam was recently sentenced to a year in prison and two years in internal exile for “propaganda against the state”—all because he and his wife attended an illegal house church in Iran.

Both Sam and Maryam were forbidden from working in their job sectors—if they lose their ongoing appeals, they will both be unable to work. Maryam was also fined about $400 for her “crime” of attending a house church.

PLEASE JOIN SAM AND MARYAM IN PRAYER. ASK GOD TO INTERVENE IN THIS HEARTBREAKING SITUATION AND GIVE THEM STRENGTH TO STAND. LIFT UP YOUR FAMILY IN IRAN AS THEY SEEK TO LIVE OUT THE GOSPEL IN A PLACE THAT OFTEN REGARDS THEM WITH SUSPICION AND HATE.

Pastor’s home and church destroyed and burned

We continue to hear reports of increasing violent persecution against church leaders in Bangladesh. Pastor Badal Day, who lives in the country’s northeastern region, is one of the leaders attacked for his faith late last year.

He and his wife, Isona Rani, were attacked in their home by a mob of 25 people brandishing axes and machetes.

Badal pled with the mob: “We Christians are minorities here. We are not against anybody. Please do not do this. Please have mercy on us.” But the mob ignored his pleas. After beating the couple, they destroyed the inside of Badal’s home.

“Please break the church,” he said. “We worship here. We beg you to not break the church. We are Christians.” But the mob ignored his pleas.

Before leaving, the mob threatened Badal and Isona:

“Leave this place by tonight. If we see you here tomorrow, then you will be killed. Leave this place soon, if you want to survive.”

Currently, the couple is living in a small tent in the corner of their broken house. After reluctantly filing a case with police, Badal continues to receive anonymous threatening phone calls telling him not to proceed with the case. They tell him the consequences will be even worse than their current situation.

At press time, Open Doors local partners were assessing the situation and preparing to come alongside the couple.

PRAY FOR BADAL AND ISONA AS THEY STRUGGLE TO LIVE IN THIS HOSTILE COMMUNITY. ASK GOD TO GIVE THEM PEACE AND ASSURANCE THAT HE IS WITH THEM AS THEY SUFFER FOR HIM.
North Korea's early indoctrination of its children—ensuring the worship of the ruling Kim family—is one of the first steps the state takes to control its people.

Now, we have reports the country has intensified its “Greatness Education” curriculum in preschools. According to DailyNK, Kim Yo Jong, sister to Kim Jong Un, recently ordered changes to what children are taught. According to a source in North Hamgyong Province, preschoolers aged 5 and 6 used to spend only 30 minutes a day learning about the childhoods of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Now, in the updated curriculum, each day children will spend a total of 90 minutes on “Greatness Education.” One hour each day is devoted to learning about the childhoods of the rulers, followed by another 30 minutes in which children learn “revolutionary” music from the leaders’ childhoods.

According to the source, the updated curriculum tells preschoolers that when Kim Jong Un was just 5 years old, he was a bright child who “rode a yacht, did target practice and liked to read.”

Timothy Cho, a refugee living in Europe, remembers growing up in North Korea. He explains: “North Korean children are brainwashed so they will honor the leader of their day. In preschool, the teachers prayed to the leaders at lunchtime. We had to give thanks to the dictators for our ‘daily bread.’ Now, I realize they stole this from the Lord’s Prayer.”

This kind of indoctrination is the reason why North Korean parents often can’t share their Christian faith with their children. Young children may unknowingly (or intentionally) expose their family’s faith to authorities. Many refugees have shared stories with Open Doors of finding a Bible hidden in their parents’ home and wondering if they should turn in their own parents to the authorities.

Maria was on her way to her job at a factory when three armed men blocked her path. They pointed their guns at the young girl and forced her into a car.

Three days later, Maria’s parents saw their daughter in court—flanked by her kidnappers. Unexpectedly, Maria shared five words that would change all of their lives: “I have converted to Islam.”

Then, Maria left with her abductors. One of the men had chosen Maria to be his second wife. Maria comes from a Christian family, and there was nothing her parents could do. These Muslim men abducted their daughter and forced her to convert to Islam—and into marriage.

Hana*, an Open Doors partner who works in a majority-Muslim country in Asia, offered help to Maria’s family. Cases like these aren’t new to her and other Open Doors partners.

“There are at least two cases of disappearing Christian women and girls each day,” Hana shares.

Thankfully, Maria managed to escape. Now she and her family are in hiding. Maria said she never willfully converted to Islam but was forced to because of her kidnappers’ threats.

Hana explains that most of the Christian families whose daughters have been kidnapped receive such harsh threats that they must move to another region.

“We must pray for these young girls and women,” Hana says. “Your prayers give Maria, and others like her, the courage to stand up to an impossible system.”

PRAY FOR NORTH KOREA’S CHILDREN, ASKING JESUS TO PROTECT THEIR HEARTS AND MINDS—THAT HE WOULD DROWN OUT THE NEGATIVE MESSAGES AND INSTILL IN CHRISTIAN FAMILIES A COMMITMENT TO ONE DAY SHARE THEIR FAITH WITH THEIR CHILDREN.
By Isaac Six, Open Doors USA Director of Advocacy

There is nowhere on earth quite like North Korea. As Hyeonseo Lee, one of North Korea’s highest profile defectors, once put it: “Leaving North Korea is not like leaving any other country. It is more like leaving another universe. I will never truly be free of its gravity, no matter how far I journey.”

It is the strangeness of this “other universe” and its seemingly impenetrable systems that have led many advocates for freedom in North Korea to despair. We know tens of thousands of Christians are imprisoned in unimaginably brutal conditions. We know faith in Jesus can mean execution and imprisonment for generations. We know this has been going on for over 70 years. What we don’t know is how to bring it all to an end.

Typically, the U.S. can use its considerable global influence to slowly move countries in a positive direction—toward greater freedom for religious minorities and away from violent persecution. Our advocacy efforts use this influence to help the persecuted church. North Korea, however, is in a class of its own when it comes to resisting any kind of outside pressure. Not only does the Kim family dynasty have an iron grip on every aspect of North Korean life, China willingly uses its economic might to prop up the regime, bypass international sanctions and squash efforts to encourage any real change in North Korea.

In short, North Korea is the hardest advocacy project in the world.

This is not to say there have never been any successful advocacy efforts. In 2014, American missionary Kenneth Bae was released after two years of imprisonment, thanks to advocacy work highlighting his case and backchannel diplomacy by the United States. In 2018, Pastor Kim Dong Chul and two Korean-American Christian teachers were released from imprisonment, again following extensive advocacy campaigns and U.S. diplomatic efforts behind the scenes.

We also raise the cases of North Korean defectors who have managed to escape to nearby countries, many of whom are helped by missionaries and come to Christ during their long journeys on the “underground railroad.” While China quickly hands captured defectors back to North Korean authorities, often to face imprisonment or death, some nearby countries can be negotiated with. Vietnam, Russia and Thailand, when faced with pressure from the United States, may help get North Korean defectors to safety in South Korea, though this tends to be the exception rather than the rule.

Our advocacy efforts also aim to make the issue of religious freedom front and center for policymakers engaged in talks with North Korea. Religious freedom and human rights usually take a backseat in these negotiations, but we make the case that true long-term improvements in North Korea rest on basic freedoms being granted to the people of North Korea.

We don’t know when the Kim family’s reign of terror will come to an end, but for those of us praying and working to see it end, it must always be a question of when, not if. We believe that even the Kim family, perhaps the greatest modern-day persecutors of Christians in the world, can one day find Jesus. If our advocacy work can help North Korea, and even the Kim family, find Jesus, then it is a work well worth doing, no matter how many generations it may take.

TO FIND OUT HOW YOU CAN BE INVOLVED IN OUR ADVOCACY WORK AND TO SIGN UP FOR REGULAR UPDATES, PLEASE VISIT: OPENDOORSUSA.ORG/TAKE-ACTION/ADVOCACY
‘Will I survive this hell?’

Life inside a North Korean prison camp

The story of a Christian imprisoned in North Korea
Your name is the first thing they take.

Then they take your freedom.

They take your health.

They take away the presence of other people.

They take your clothes.

And your hair.

And finally, they take away the daylight.

Drip by drip, like a faucet slowly running dry, you're left with nothing but your own mind and body—and both of those will eventually be stamped out by this place.

My name is Prisoner 42. Of course, this isn't my real name. But it's the name I was given when I came into this prison in North Korea.

Every morning at 8 am, they call for “42.” When I stand up, I'm not allowed to look at the guards. I have to get up, put my hands behind my back and follow them to the interrogation room. I can see the shadows of the guards, but I'm careful to never appear as though I'm looking at them.

Even though the same thing happens every day, each day, I am still so afraid. Each time they call out for “42,” they beat and kick me. It hurts the most when they hit my ears. My ears ring for hours—sometimes days.

But for now, at least I'm alive.
Am I a Christian? Yes. But I have to pretend. If I admit I was helped by Chinese Christians, I will be killed—either quickly or slowly.

A secret heritage of faith
The first Christian I ever knew was my grandfather—even though I had no idea at the time. On Sundays, he often told me to leave the house and play outside. I didn't understand why and didn't want to, but he forced me to.

When I fled to China because of the famine in North Korea, I met other Christians for the first time. I was touched by them. They never really spoke about the gospel, but I participated in their worship services. Then, one night, I dreamed of my grandfather. I saw him sitting in a circle with other men. There was a Bible in the middle and all of them were praying.

In my dream, I shouted at him: “I am a believer too!”
I gave my life to Jesus.

Somehow, mysteriously, I realized I came from a Christian family … in North Korea.

The interrogation that never ends
I’m in the interrogation room for an hour each morning. Every day, they ask the same questions.

“Why were you in China?”
“Who did you meet?”
“Did you go to church?”
“Did you have a Bible?”
“Did you meet any South Koreans?”
“Are you a Christian?”

After they are done with me, they bring me back to my cell. My cell is warm during the day and cold at night—and in the winter or summer, the temperature can be unbearable. It’s so small, I can barely lie down.

But I’m not allowed to lie down much, anyway. I have to sit on my knees, with closed fists. I’m not even allowed to open them. The place I live now is not fit for any human—but to the guards, I am not a human. I’m less than an animal. I’m locked in this cage, the heavy door and locks slamming closed behind me, echoing in the dim light that never gets brighter in this place.

I am in solitary confinement, because they suspect the truth. They can see through my denials in the interrogation room.

Because I love Jesus.
I resisted but couldn’t get away. They pushed me into the car and, when the door closed and the car drove away, I realized my life was over.

After a few weeks in a Chinese prison cell, I was handed over to the North Korean authorities. They brought me to this detention center. I had to strip off all my clothes and they searched every part of my body to see if I had hidden anything, money especially.

They shaved all my hair off and brought me to this prison cell.

I was ordered to put on different clothes that didn’t fit and didn’t match. Probably from a previous prisoner. That’s where my name came from—the number 42 was printed on my prison jumpsuit. I was just another in a line of Prisoner 42s. I wondered: What happened to the previous Prisoner 42? Was she dead? Had she been executed, starved or beaten to death—or simply wasted away, like a faucet finally shut off? I supposed she could have been alive—but that was doubtful. Anyone who has ever heard about North Korean prisons knows merely surviving is a heroic tale.

**Alone and never alone**

I’m so alone here. I know there are other prisoners. I can hear their voices, but I never see them. The only thing I see are the shadows of the guards, and the light from the sun and moon as they pass over the small window of my cell.

All I can do is pray. Pray and sing in my heart. Never out loud, only in my heart. I sing a song I wrote in my head:

My heart longs for my Father in this prison
Although the road to truth is steep and narrow
A bright future will be revealed when I continue
Without faith, calamity will strike in this road
Allow me to go forth toward the fortress
Although there may be much grief and complications
How could I follow in the footsteps of my God?
With tears my heart longs for my Father in this prison
Father, please accept this sinful daughter
Please protect me in Your mountain fortress and under Your shield
Take me under Your wings of peace
Father’s voice that comes from the sky
Guide me to Your blessings daily

It’s been a year now. I don’t know how long I will survive. One day, they will call me and I won’t move. I will have died here, in the dark. They will dispose of my body and the first

---

Open Doors estimates there are more than 50,000 Christians imprisoned in the vast prison system in North Korea.
new prisoner who comes in will take my prison clothes and become the new Prisoner 42 and will wear my clothes. Will they survive this hell? Will they be bruised in the same places I'm bruised? Will they cry out to God—the only One who seems to see what’s happening to us in here? Will they die here, like me?

But Prisoner 42 didn’t die. She lived. Her life was painful and terrifying, but she survived. And eventually, she was called out of her prison cell and taken to court.

Going to court was a victory. People who are sent to labor camps for political “crimes”—crimes like following Jesus—are never sentenced by a judge. They just disappear from the cells. Most Christians go there. My persistent denials have paid off. They have not found me guilty of being a Christian.

At the court, there was no lawyer to represent me. I just stood in front of the judge with guards behind me. But I wasn’t alone. My husband was there, too. He looked at me with the saddest eyes I have ever seen. He had clearly been crying. I wanted to say so much and I know he wanted to talk too, but we couldn’t say a single word.

The judge asked him if he wanted to divorce me. In a broken voice, he said: “Yes.”

It broke my heart. But he had to make this decision for the sake of our family—for our children. They would all be punished if he didn’t divorce me.

I was sentenced to four years in a re-education camp. That’s where I am now.

In the camp, I work 12 hours a day. Sometimes more. Every day is just one long nightmare. But at least I am not alone in a cell anymore. For an entire year of solitary confinement, my skin didn’t touch a single ray of sunlight. Just to be taken from that cell, to be taken outside and to feel the wind, was amazing.

When I first arrived at this camp, I saw moving, shapeless forms. It took me a moment to realize these were people. Some were bent over. Others were missing an arm or a leg. I looked at my own arms and legs—they were so thin they looked like matchsticks. I didn’t look much better than the other inmates.

Church in a prison
About a month ago, I was sick and allowed to stay in the barracks. I thought I was alone—and then I noticed

Prisoners in North Korean camps describe horrific conditions—and their stories of atrocities are all similar. It’s one of the biggest human rights abuses in modern times.
a blanket in the corner. It was moving. I stared at it, and realized there was a person underneath.

I tiptoed toward the blanket and listened intently. The sounds were hardly audible, yet they sounded familiar.

Suddenly I realized what was happening. There was a woman and she was praying. I went back to my mattress and watched her closely for the next several days.

About a week later, we were working outside. Nobody was near, and I walked up to her and whispered: “Hello, greetings in Jesus’ name.”

Her face went white with shock. She knew if anyone overheard us, we’d both likely be shot on the spot. But she saw there was no one around, and gave me a silent smile.

We formed a secret church inside the camp. When we met and felt safe enough, we prayed the Lord’s Prayer and recited Scripture and the Apostles’ Creed together.

She is much braver than I was. She speaks to others about Christ, as well.

That’s probably why, one day, a car came to pick her up. When I saw her leave, I knew they were taking her to a Kwangli-so—a death camp.

That’s the last time I saw her.
I’m here in my barracks. God has been with me every day, every hour, every minute and every second. Yesterday, it was announced that I would be released. I have only served two years.

The first thing I’ll do when I get out is find my husband and children. My children are much bigger now. We haven’t seen each other in years.

But God has watched over me. He kept me from giving up, even when it felt like I was being poured out. It turned out I was not merely a faucet running dry—Jesus gave me Living Water, to keep me going when it seemed like I would fail. He kept me from ending my life, He helped me pray and cry out to Him.

I pray and believe He also watches over my kids every second of every minute of every hour of every day. I need to tell them about this loving God.

Visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/Prisoner42 to see a video dramatization of this story.

Based on true stories

This story is based on a real-life account of a North Korean Christian who was sent first to a prison and then to a re-education camp. There are other details added from other prisoners’ accounts. Open Doors has heard stories like this from numerous North Korean believers—and disturbingly, the details are all eerily similar. Following Jesus in North Korea is enough to lead to imprisonment in these kinds of conditions, or can lead to immediate execution.

Prisoner 42’s story takes place every day for thousands of people around North Korea.

Open Doors estimates there are 50,000 to 70,000 Christians imprisoned in North Korean prisons. Through secret networks in China, Open Doors provides spiritual and physical support for Christians who are able to make it to safe houses. Christians like Prisoner 42 are able to survive by leaning on Jesus, thanks to this training and aid—and when North Korean Christians return home, they do so with food, Bibles, discipleship training and more. These things strengthen the growing church in North Korea—showing that Living Water can never be shut off.

*Representative names used for security reasons
Hye learned about Kim Il-sung at school, but about God at home. Her family has a long Christian heritage, and her parents and grandparents were Christians. She explains: “My grandmother was a member of a Baptist church, which was closed down after Kim Il-sung came into power. However, she secretly kept meeting with other Christians.”

There were meetings in Hye’s home when she was a child. Her father had a job that required him to meet a lot of people, so visitors were not suspicious. “The people would gather in a small room in our home. They were almost silent. Children like me had to go outside and play. We also had to watch out for other people. As soon as someone came near to our house I ran home to warn my grandmother. She was the leader of the group and also the preacher.”

Hye’s grandmother owned a very old Chinese Bible and her father had a Korean Bible. “They read from the Bible of course, and sang songs too, but there was almost no sound coming from their mouths. The other Christians didn’t own a Bible. They shared books, which my grandmother had written by hand.”

Owning a Bible is forbidden in North Korea. “My grandmother hid her Bible in a basket where she placed her socks and other things.”
But one day, Hye left for school in the morning without realizing she would never see her father again. “Security agents raided our house during a worship meeting. My father was arrested and taken away.

“When I came home, I expected my father to open the door. I was the youngest. He always greeted me as soon as I came back from school. He wasn’t there. I looked for him in his room, but he wasn’t there. My family told me he was taken away.”

Hye was devastated. She can still hardly talk about these events. All she can say is, “The house was chaos.”

Only two weeks later, her grandmother passed away. Before she did, she told Hye and the other family members not to worry. “We all have to die. We don’t belong to this world, we belong to heaven.”

Her grandmother instructed Hye’s mother to get her Bible. “We knew they were coming for us. We had to burn it. My grandmother said it was okay as long as we stayed true to our faith in God. But when the flames devoured the pages, my grandmother wept intensely.”

Not long after Hye’s grandmother died, Hye’s family was taken in for questioning by security agents. “We told them we had no clue about my father reading the Bible, that we thought that book was for his work.”

That was when the agents started to play the tape. “They had broken into our house and placed a bug in our old clock.” There was no denying everyone knew about the Christian faith of Hye’s father.

For some reason, the family was banished to a remote area, not sent to a labor camp. “We were grateful that God had saved our lives. Life wasn’t easy, of course. Many people died of starvation in our area. However, we were somewhat better off than the others because we lived close to the mountains, where we could find plants and trees. God fed us this way. We maintained our faith but lost all contact with other believers. We couldn’t look for anyone back then.”

With her father’s Bible confiscated and her grandmother’s Bible burned, there were no scriptures left—except for what was in their heads. “My sister wrote whatever she remembered on paper and hid it somewhere in secret. She would look at those papers whenever she was going through difficult times.”
“We don’t belong to this world, we belong to heaven.”
Hye’s family lived like this for more than 10 years—they were barely surviving. Then one day, a man showed up at their door. He said a Chinese-Korean pastor had sent him. “This pastor used to visit our house when my father was still with us. But we did not trust the person who came to our house. We thought he was a secret agent, and we wanted to send him back. However, he had walked almost four hours to come to our house and we listened to him.”

The man called the pastor the family knew in China with a mobile phone. Finally, they believed him when the pastor told them Hye’s mother’s name, which was very unusual.

“He told us to come to China and also told me that there were many North Korean defectors in his church too. I replied that my mother was already very old. I did not want to leave her.”

But the pastor did not give in. Hye spoke to her mother about his plan. “She said that she was old and wanted me to go. I was sure I would never see her again, but I could not cry about it inside the house. Perhaps we were still being tapped. And I could not cry outside the house, or someone would become suspicious.”

Hye had to walk for six hours to the border. “I safely crossed the river. The pastor and his wife were waiting for me in the car at the other side.”

Later, they took her to their church, where a service was taking place. “As soon as I stepped inside, I burst into tears. So many things shot through my head. I couldn’t stop thinking about my grandmother and father. They would have longed for this service too.”

After some time, Hye managed to reach South Korea. As soon as Hye was accepted as a legal refugee, she paid people to look for her family and try to get them to South Korea too. “One day someone called me on my phone. I picked up and heard a voice I thought I would never hear again. It was my mother. She told me she was at the Chinese border and would cross the river that night. I was so surprised and happy!”

“My whole family is now in South Korea. It feels unreal. God made this possible.”

“My sister wrote whatever she remembered on paper and hid it somewhere in secret.”

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Reaching through the prison bars

By David Curry, CEO of Open Doors USA

When I look at the images of Prisoner 42 behind the bars of a North Korean prison cell, I’m struck by how those prison bars divide us. [Editor’s note: Read more about Prisoner 42 on page 12.]

People like her may never experience freedom. I may never endure persecution. While she is totally alone in that cell in that picture, I am surrounded by people who encourage me through every hardship. And though we can’t switch places—or even learn each other’s names, this side of eternity—there is one thing that unites us: our shared love for Jesus.

So isn’t it a shame when we, as people of faith, divide ourselves by prison bars of our own construction?

We’ve all been through painful divisions in our families, our churches, our communities and our country. It’s easy to become combative when we face differences and difficulty, whether they are political, emotional, cultural or theological. Even religion is divisive—perhaps especially so.

There’s too much at stake for the people of Jesus to be distracted by division. Jesus, too, lived in a world full of competing ideas, warring factions and false accusations. But He didn’t let the noise drown out the big idea: God doesn’t want us to be divided.

Just before Jesus was led to the cross, He prayed—not for Himself, but for us, His followers. He didn’t pray for us to be powerful. He didn’t even pray for us to be good. He prayed only for us to be unified:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.”

John 17:20–21

The persecution of Jesus is on the frontlines of a broken world, paying the highest prices—even their lives—to follow Jesus in the most difficult places. That’s why I believe the persecuted church is the thing God will use to draw the world to Himself in the coming days. They are the key to God’s next great move, and we must stand behind them.

Will you join me this year in cultivating a spirit of unity among the people of Jesus? Our persecuted brothers and sisters need us to reach through all the walls that divide us—with our prayers, our advocacy and our support, each reminding them they are not alone.

They need us to be people who break down prison bars.

• People who refuse bitterness, offering forgiveness instead.
• People who choose to love not just those who agree, but especially those who disagree.
• People who, with the Holy Spirit’s power and presence, lead a broken world to the healing presence of Jesus.
Spotlights

Patricia Streeter

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.
I am a ministry leader, software developer, mother of two grown daughters and grandmother, living in Orange County, California.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?
When I moved to California, I started hearing about the persecuted church from an Open Doors radio broadcast and felt a great urgency to do something about it!

WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?
I have a heart for the persecuted church everywhere, but I especially care for Sudan, having met and helped one of the lost boys of Sudan, who was forced to flee for his life during the genocidal attacks of the Islamic government. I am also very grieved by the current intense violence suffered by believers in Nigeria!

HOW DO YOU SERVE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH THROUGH OPEN DOORS?
I am a Connector. I try to bring awareness and prayer for the persecuted church at my church. I also try to educate other churches. I host two large events each year to bring support and prayer for the persecuted church. I am now the co-director of the new Anglican Persecuted Church Network that we started last year at the New Wineskins Global Missions Conference.

WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT HELPING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?
If the Lord is giving you a heart for our suffering brothers and sisters, but you think you aren’t “good enough” to help them, let me encourage you to pray and step out in faith! I can tell you from personal experience that this ministry is so important to the Lord that He will not let you fail!

Sara Willoughby

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.
I’m an American teenager and author. My two biggest passions are for persecuted believers and my fellow chronic illnesses warriors. I love adventures of most kinds, whether that’s trying a weird new food or hiking with my family.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF THE PROBLEM OF PERSECUTION AGAINST CHRISTIANS?
I have a heart for the persecuted church everywhere, but I especially care for Sudan, having met and helped one of the lost boys of Sudan, who was forced to flee for his life during the genocidal attacks of the Islamic government. I am also very grieved by the current intense violence suffered by believers in Nigeria!

HOW DO YOU SERVE PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS THROUGH OPEN DOORS?
I pray, of course, but I also write monthly devotionals for a group in the Middle East and edit letters to persecuted believers around the world to help ensure security.

WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT SERVING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?
So many are unaware of what our brothers and sisters in Christ are facing, and even when we are aware, it’s easy to feel like there is so little we can do. But there is so much we can do that has such a lasting impact. Don’t believe the lie that you’re unable to help!
**Bob Noble**

**TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.**

I live in the Pittsburgh area and have two sons and seven grandchildren. My wife, Linda, died six years ago. I worked for a natural gas utility serving southwestern Pennsylvania and retired as a Division Manager in 1995. I am active in a local Christian and Missionary Alliance church and volunteer at a personal care/skilled nursing facility.

**WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?**

My wife and I became aware of persecuted Christians in the 1970s by attending an Open Doors dinner in the city where we lived.

**WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?**

China is a place I have a heart for. On an Open Doors ministry trip that Linda and I [took] to China, we had the privilege to be Bible couriers.

**HOW DO YOU SERVE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH THROUGH OPEN DOORS?**

Currently, I support the persecuted church/Open Doors by giving through Qualified Charitable Distributions from my IRA. I try to keep informed about persecution through various Open Doors communications, and occasionally have an opportunity to share about the ministry.

In the past, Linda and I were involved in the Bridge Builder program, which was the Open Doors volunteer program at the time. We also were on ministry trips to Cuba, China, [the] Middle East, Mexico, Vietnam and Indonesia. After I retired, I worked three years, part-time, for Open Doors as a Regional Representative.

**WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT HELPING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?**

I would encourage others to keep informed about persecution and pray. We may not be able to financially support, or go, but we can all pray.

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**Pat Timmons**

**TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.**

My name is Pat. I’m a wife, mother of three married daughters and grandmother to four active young boys. I’m very blessed to live in the same town as all of them! For 18 years, I taught my daughters at home. I consider teaching them how to read as my greatest accomplishment.

**WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?**

One place I have a heart for is Africa, but my main burden is for the healing of the trauma persecuted Christians suffer all over the world. Such unimaginable things happen to them. My prayers are that they would have the strength to be a strong witness for the love of God through Jesus.

**HOW DO YOU SERVE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH THROUGH OPEN DOORS?**

I help get the electronic letters that many send from all over the world ready to go out to the persecuted brothers and sisters. The stories are so sad, but I find that doing this small thing is a way I can help. I feel it is a privilege to be able to help. As I read through the letters, I can pray for those who will receive them.

**WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT HELPING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?**

The most important thing is to do what you can. Even the smallest thing is meaningful. And then praise God who is able to help all of us finish the course!
The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the people of Israel: The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor His anger forever; He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on His children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him; for He knows how we are formed, He remembers that we are dust.

— Psalm 103:6-14

Christians who live in some areas of China are targeted doubly for their faith—first, because of their ethnicity and, second, because of their faith. In these places, the government targets huge groups of people who are predominantly Muslim and sends them to re-education camps. Rights groups say more than a million people have been detained for no reason.

Ehmet* is a Christian in a Muslim community who was detained and sent to a re-education camp. He wasn’t too concerned at first because he knew his other family members were already in there. So initially, he simply trusted God and thought, “I should be out again next month.”

But after 12 months had passed, he was still inside the camp. Ehmet became depressed. Finally, he handed everything over to God. He prayed: “Lord, I surrender. You decide when I should be released.” As soon as he had prayed this prayer, a peace came over him.

Ehmet’s story echoes the words of Psalm 103: God is good and He is in control. All of us—including Ehmet—are ultimately powerless to add even a single day to our lives. In the words of Genesis 3:19, we “are dust and to dust [we] will return.”

Eventually Ehmet was freed from the camp, and even after the terrible experience, Ehmet still follows Jesus and desires nothing more than to share the gospel with his community. It may seem scary or hard when we realize we have no actual control over our lives; but just like Ehmet, when we turn over control to God, His peace will come upon us.

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank You for Your grace and your love. Thank You that even when we realize our lack of control, we can trust You to have complete control in our lives. We ask that You would be with Christians like Ehmet, who risk so much to follow You. Please equip him and strengthen him to continue to live out the gospel. We pray the peace You gave him will continue. Please be our peace, no matter what. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.
Stunning persecution — incredible resilience

Get your free copy of the 2021 World Watch List, the annual list of 50 places where it’s most dangerous to follow Jesus.

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