‘I surrender all’:
A story from Iran

One family lost almost everything for Jesus.
Was it worth it?
You can be there through the Open Doors Frontline Partner monthly giving program

By giving $30 a month you can provide your persecuted family with critical support and emergency relief.

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Saghar’s house church was raided. Would she remember what she’d learned?

What the American church is missing
Jesus commands us to be unified. Have we lost sight of that?

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ON THE COVER
Taher is a Christian from Iran who faced an impossible choice: risk his family, or renounce his faith? Read more on page 13.

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
On the evening of August 4, 2020, a masked man dressed in black entered Bakhit Aziz Georgi’s store in Egypt and, at gunpoint, kidnapped the 68-year-old Bakhit—a known Christian in the village.

Youssef Samaan Girgis, Bakhit’s 35-year-old nephew, vividly remembers that night. He remembers watching as a pick-up truck with five armed men dressed in black pulled up outside Bakhit’s small shop and stopped in front. He watched as one of the men broke in, aimed a gun at his uncle, forced Bakhit out of the store and dragged him onto the back of the waiting truck.

Youssef approached the men, thinking they were police. And that’s when one of the men asked Youssef to show his ID card—which clearly identified his religion.

“When he saw my ID card and realized that I’m Christian, he asked me if I was related to Bakhit,” Youssef shares. “I said, ‘He is my uncle (my mother’s brother).’ That’s when they pointed a gun at me and put me in the back of the truck with my uncle and fled.”

Inside the truck, the terrorists took Youssef’s and Bakhit’s cell phones. Then they threatened their lives.

“They pointed their weapons at us and said if any one of them heard [anything] from us, they would kill us,” Youssef said.

Then the darkness came—Youssef and his uncle were blindfolded. It would be the last time Youssef would see anything for the next 13 days. In the darkness, the terrorists hurled insults at their captives, calling them names like “infidel” and saying they were “defiled.” For two hours, the sound of the men’s voices pounded Youssef’s and Bakhit’s ears as the truck bobbed violently up and down over the uneven desert ground.

‘I stayed up all night crying and praying’

The truck stopped and Youssef, still blindfolded, felt the ropes tightening around his hands. That night, he and his uncle were separated. He would hear no one’s voice but his captors’ the rest of the time he was there.

“They put me in a room and said, ‘We don’t want to hear any voice from you,’”
Youssef remembers. He asked where his uncle was.

“They said, ‘Don’t ask.’”

Alone in the room, hands tied and unable to see, Youssef heard voices outside the door. Maybe they were in the hall of the home, Youssef thought. “I expected that they were going to kill us at any time,” he says. This wasn't the first time his family had encountered violence of this sort. In July 2016, Youssef’s cousin Osama (one of Bakhit’s sons) was also kidnapped. The family is still awaiting his return.

Youssef didn’t sleep that night. Instead, he prayed.

“I prayed to God with tears to rescue me and my uncle.” Quietly, he shares his prayer:

Oh God, be with me and my uncle, strengthen us, protect us and rescue us from the hands of these wicked people. You are our protection.

“I stayed up all night crying and praying to God.”

‘I felt the prayers’

The next 13 days passed like months, Youssef says. Each hour of darkness melted into the other. He received little food: bread, cheese, water, lentils. The first day, in the afternoon or early evening, Youssef remembers hearing the doorknob turn and footsteps and then feeling the ropes lifted from his hands. His captor was there to give him food. As soon as Youssef finished eating, his hands were untied again. Each night, he slept on the ground. Each day, he received only one meal. He was insulted nonstop.

“Every day was a nightmare. I couldn’t distinguish the day from the night,” he says. “They insulted me continuously and treated me very badly. Plus, I was far from family. I missed my children so much.”

Youssef was never allowed to contact his family.

“I asked if I could talk to them, but they refused and insulted me,” he says. Like other ex-captives have told Open Doors, prayer was his comfort. As Youssef prayed, God brought certain scriptures to mind:

Psalm 27:1 (The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid)

Psalm 138:7 (Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life: you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes)

“Many times, I asked God to [grant me] mercy and rescue me from this torment and pain,” he says. “When I was praying to God, I felt comfort. I was always repeating these verses in my mind. I really felt a great comfort from God, peace of mind and tranquility when I said these verses.” He also sensed others praying for him. “I felt the prayers. I knew my family, members of my church and many Christians were praying for me and my uncle,” Youssef says. “All of us are one body in Christ.”

Youssef’s prayers were answered August 17. Still blindfolded, he heard the door swing open and his hands were untied. In silence, he was loaded into a vehicle. After two hours, the truck stopped and he was pushed out of the truck. After he heard the truck drive away and realized he was alone, Youssef removed the blindfold and, for the first time in 13 days, saw his surroundings. He knew where he was: a desert close to his village.

“I felt very great joy. I thanked God for releasing me. All the glory be to Him! I really thought I would never see my children again. I thank God for sending this miracle.”

Targeted for their faith

Bakhit and Youssef knew that night they had been kidnapped because they are Christians. The Girgis family is the only Christian family in the village.

“They knew what they were going to do,” Youssef says. “They came to the village specifically to kidnap my uncle. All the people in our village and the nearby villages know he is Christian. And when they saw that I was a Christian on my ID card, they kidnapped me, too.”

“These men chose [to kidnap] Bakhit and Youssef because they are Christians,” says an Open Doors representative who works with our local partners in Egypt.

When we asked Youssef why he thought his family has become a target of persecution, he reminded us of the reality for the estimated 16,625,000 Christians in Egypt: “All of us as Christians are persecuted because of our faith in Jesus Christ.”

Since Youssef and Bakhit were kidnapped, Open Doors’ local partners in Egypt have shared numerous other reports of Christians being beaten, abducted and killed for their faith.

‘Prayers make miracles’

Some 113 days after Youssef was released, Bakhit returned home safely as well. On December 8, 2020, at 11 p.m., he saw his family for the first time in four months.

“Prayers make miracles,” Youssef says. “When we pray together, we feel that God stands up with us, keeps us, and we feel inner peace. Thank you so much for standing with us, your concern and your faithful prayers for us. We appreciate them so much. May God bless you all!”
Bangladesh: Believers trained to teach literacy

God is raising up teachers of His Word in Bangladesh! Pastors, evangelists and lay workers from various denominations recently participated in Open Doors’ adult literacy teachers training.

In rural villages, illiteracy continues to prevent many believers from knowing God more deeply through Scripture. These men and women will soon be facilitators of literacy classes across their country so that even more believers can learn to read and write and study the Bible.

Pray for these brothers and sisters, that their efforts to spread God’s Word would have exponential impact.

“We will always remember you.”

Burkina Faso: ‘Through your gift, you mourn with us’

Everyone must convert to Islam or be killed.

When the jihadists first visited the village in northern Burkina Faso in the Barsalogho region, they made their ultimatum clear.

One believer, Isaiah, remembers that day: “They said they have a message for the people. One of them came to the middle of the crowd and said they came to ask people to convert to Islam. They had a flag with Arabic written on it…”

For Isaiah, it was a tough decision: forsake the only way of life he had ever known; or remain and be killed.

So, Isaiah, his wife and their four daughters fled to Kaya, a town south of their village.

Here, they had to buy everything they needed: firewood, food, water. In their former village, they were farmers. They lived off the land. In this new place, Isaiah was unable to find work to earn enough to buy essentials.

“On our arrival, we had nothing,” he says. “But God’s people had compassion on us. The leaders of the church helped us with food.”

Because of your support, the family’s one-room home in Kaya now also holds enough food to support him and his family for three months.

“We want to thank God so much. Because we have received a great gift today,” Isaiah tells our partners. “This food will help us a lot. This is a very important gift because I could not work for more than three months … It would have been very catastrophic.

“As the Bible says to mourn with those who mourn and laugh with those who laugh, through this gift, you mourn with us. We are so grateful. We will always remember you.”

*Representative names and images used for security reasons
Malaysia: Teens discipled to withstand persecution

Standing firm when persecution comes: This is the ultimate goal in a training for a group of teens in East Malaysia.

“Our goal is to encourage them to read the New Testament repeatedly throughout their high school life and get a good grasp on the content, especially on the four Gospels,” our local partner shares.

The training is equipping second- and third-generation Christians who know little about the Bible and how to read and apply it, including how to meditate on the Word.

Already, the training has made a huge impact. After two sessions, students have been much more confident in reading Scripture—many have even finished reading all four Gospels. The more advanced students are helping others who need assistance search for verses in Scripture.

“It’s encouraging to see them beginning that journey,” another trainer says, “with practices of repeat reading and marking verses they like.”

Also in Malaysia, nine boxes of Bibles were distributed to Malay Christians while another 20 boxes were delivered to believers in Brunei, where it’s illegal to leave Islam and Christians face increasing restrictions.

India: ‘This help is a testimony’

Meet your sister, Sarika*, a believer from India. She is one of the thousands of believers who have been overlooked for COVID-19 government relief because of their faith. “I used to spend time in prayers with tears,” she says.

Our local partners reached Sarika with vital emergency aid just in time.

“In all this I can say my God has never forsaken us,” Sarika shares. “My God sent help through Open Doors local partners ... This help is a testimony for me as people will know that even if they ignore us, God isn’t blind to the situation of the people who love Him.”

Sarika is one of the 126,000 believers in India who have received COVID-19 relief aid from Open Doors local partners this year. Thank you for standing with our persecuted brothers and sisters during the pandemic.

Laos and Vietnam: 2,000 Hmong children equipped with the gospel

Praise God! More than 2,000 Hmong tribal children in Laos and Vietnam will soon receive their own Sunday school guide. Open Doors partners developed the guide with the Hmong, for the Hmong. Bible stories are contextualized with Hmong illustrations—allowing the children to better understand the gospel in light of their own culture.

The Hmong people are traditionally animists, believing that objects are possessed by either good or bad spirits that must be appeased. The guide was designed specifically to help children understand that Jesus is more powerful than spirits.

To help children read the guide and disciple this generation of potential church leaders, earlier this year 18 Sunday school teachers attended a training to learn how to share the materials with the children they will soon teach.

“[My word] will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11).
When Sabitri* decided to leave Buddhism to follow Jesus in Nepal, her husband pressured her to renounce her new faith. Over time, their two sons who lived with her and saw Sabitri’s faith every day also trusted in Jesus.

Their conversion angered her husband even more. Sabitri shared that one day as she was praying and singing, her husband attacked and beat her so violently she needed facial stitches. That’s when she and her sons made the decision to leave her husband’s house and construct a small shelter of their own.

Because of you, Open Doors’ partners in Nepal were able to help build this frightened family a new home. Says Sabitri: “In our most critical moment, Open Doors partners extended the financial assistance to build the house. I thank God for His love and provision. Because of this house, now we feel safer and free to worship God.”

### Nepal: Safe and free to worship

Your support helped build a new home for frightened believers.

### 12,500 people receive vital food aid in Central Asia

A young pregnant girl without a husband

A widow and single mother of two whose husband died of a heart attack

A large family whose father lost his job

A family without government documents (unable to claim government benefits)

A large family with two orphaned children

These are just a few of the desperate families Open Doors has reached in Central Asia. With your support, 2,000 families (an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 individuals) received food aid and other practical help they needed.

“Even if it’s hard to reach them, the church finds a way to send food and make intentional visits,” says Open Doors partner Saida. “Without the food, the people would have starved.”

Timur, one of the believers who received a food package, shares his gratitude: “We are very thankful that even though we never met personally, we feel your presence and love and faith in God. There will be some day in Heaven when we will spend a lot of time talking, looking back on the joys and on the work we could do together.”

The food packages also opened the door to show the love of Christ to both Christians and Muslims. Our field workers remember how a Muslim organization asked if they would help people who aren’t Christians. They quickly answered yes: “We can help all people in need.”

“It’s a huge testimony for Muslims to see that we don’t divide Christians from non-Christians,” Saida says. “Now, through this help, Christians in many Central Asian countries have a huge opportunity to show the real face of Christ.”

*Representative names and images used for security reasons
The COVID-19 pandemic made existing vulnerabilities even worse. Over the last year, Pressure Points—like deadly violence, targeted seduction and physical attacks—increased. In domestic situations, pandemic lockdowns led to increased physical attacks on Christians isolated in their homes with hostile family members who disapprove of their faith.

GSRP occurs at a higher rate in countries experiencing conflict. For Christian men, the risk of abduction, death and forced conscription into the military or militias escalated sharply. Women are more likely to be trafficked, seduced or forced to flee the country, in addition to facing an increased chance of abduction.

Reports of “psychological violence” and “trafficking” increased for women. The rise in psychological violence mostly affects women and girls, who often live in fear of attacks or struggle to move on from the trauma of past physical and sexual assaults. Women also are primarily impacted by the rise in human trafficking, although bonded labor and trafficking continue to impact men and boys, too.

Shame dynamics are key factors in making GSRP effective against Christian men and women. Christian men report being shamed and denigrated when they are detained and physically beaten or discriminated against within the workplace. Sexual violence and forced marriage are used as tools of shame, coercion and control, primarily against Christian women and girls.

Individual attacks on men and women target the family and the Christian community. Attacks target the areas most vulnerable to individuals—often what their society considers the role or value of men and women. The goal is the same, regardless of the persecution: to stop the Church from growing and flourishing.

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has made vulnerable Christians even more vulnerable. In 2020, gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP) rose to the highest level we have seen since starting our annual research into this topic three years ago. Our report analyzed “Pressure Points” that uniquely targeted men and women differently to try to stamp out faith in Jesus. Here are five specific takeaways from our most recent research, showing the unique ways men and women suffer for following Jesus—all in an effort to destroy the Church.

Please pray for Christians experiencing these types of targeted attacks.
Persecution Watch

WHAT’S HAPPENING WITH GOD’S PEOPLE, STANDING STRONG FOR HIM IN PLACES WHERE FOLLOWING JESUS CAN COST THE MOST

MYANMAR

Pastor after coup: ‘It feels like our hope has been taken away’

On the morning of February 1, Christians around the world woke up to the news of a coup in Myanmar. The military takeover sent Christians to their knees in prayer.

A day after the coup, Pastor Zay, a church leader in Rakhine State, shared with Brother Lwin, one of our Open Doors on-the-ground partners: “Our lifetime has been full of grief, fear and trouble under the military regime,” Pastor Zay explained. “It feels like our hope has been taken away.”

Military rule could mean reinforced power for Buddhism, Myanmar’s dominant religion, because the military government of the past has always been protective of their majority-Buddhist culture. “This may have serious implications on the church,” Brother Lwin says.

Myanmar’s military ruled the country for several decades until 2010, when elections were held and power was partially given to Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, bringing a more open democracy. The military has declared a one-year state of emergency.

“The political and economic situation is very unstable and volatile right now. There is no telling how long the crisis will last,” our partner tells us.

At press time, the military was still in control, continuing to increase their grasp on the country.

PRAY FOR PEACE, COMFORT AND STRENGTH FOR THE PEOPLE OF MYANMAR. PRAY THAT GOD WILL WORK IN AND THROUGH CHRISTIANS AS THEY BRING GLORY TO HIM IN THIS CHANGING SITUATION.

VENEZUELA

Christian men forced to eat Bible pages

Some of our field workers recently shared a shocking report about four Christians who, after being attacked with knives and beaten with sticks, were forced to eat pages of the Bible they were reading.

This is the kind of twisted persecution Christians face.

The victims belong to a Christian church in the Venezuelan city of Libertador, where the church runs a rehabilitation center dedicated to serving those fighting drug addiction.

One of the victims reported: “The criminals covered our faces and started to beat and stab us. They drew an X on our bodies and forced us to eat the Bible.” (Editor's note: The attackers took knives and actually carved X’s into their skin.)

The center’s director, Pastor Dugarte, shared with our partners that the criminals belong to groups that oppose the center’s work. A few days before the attack, they asked the pastor for a list of people in the center. He quickly refused.

The victims were taken to a hospital with serious injuries to the head, arms and back.

PRAY FOR THE HEALING OF THESE TRAUMATIZED BELIEVERS, THAT THEY WOULD OVERCOME ANY FEARS OF RETURNING TO THE PROGRAM. PRAY BLESSINGS OVER THIS CENTER.

EGYPT

7-year-old girl taken from Christian father

In Egypt, Christians are often persecuted by Muslim extremists and police with no repercussions. This includes crimes of kidnapping and forced marriage (see page 9 for more on this). One especially difficult example of this injustice comes from our local partners who shared about a 7-year-old girl, Josiana, and her parents.

Three years ago, Josiana’s mother, a married Christian, was kidnapped and forcibly married to an extremist Muslim man. Against her will, she converted to Islam and lived with her kidnapper (most likely to keep her family safe). Josiana—4 years old at the time—was left behind to be raised by her father, Mikhail.

Three years later, Josiana has been forcibly taken from her home in Egypt. In February, Josiana’s mother, her kidnapper and local police broke into Mikhail’s home. Recently, her mother gave birth to a son, which drove her Muslim husband’s decision to kidnap and force Josiana to also convert to Islam—he didn’t want his son to have a Christian sister.

They took the young girl to live with the new family, where she will be raised as a Muslim.

PRAY THAT GOD WOULD SHELTER JOSIANA AND COMFORT MIKHAIL. PRAY ALSO FOR CHRISTIAN FAMILIES IN EGYPT WHO ARE SO VULNERABLE TO KIDNAPPING.
**India**

**Hefty fines for helping boycotted Christians**

51 blows with wooden clubs, 110 sit-ups and a fine of $342.

This is the penalty sent down for anyone associating with three Christian families who were ostracized and socially boycotted in the Korwa community in East India’s Jharkhand state.

That means anyone who’s caught helping these families get water, food, fuel—or even just talking to them—could face the cruel punishment.

An article in the local newspaper frames Christians as “gang agents pressuring people for religious conversion.” In Jharkhand, reports have surfaced of religious conversion “happening rapidly,” in many tribal scheduled cast communities, with many families accepting Christianity and rejecting their former religion.

Angered by what’s happening, the Korwa community took action against the families—and worked intentionally to keep others from hearing the gospel.

**Sudan**

**Church planter faces death threat**

Despite recent moves by Sudan’s transitional government to reverse policies violating religious freedom, a Christian youth leader in the country’s east-central Gezira state has reportedly been arrested and had his life threatened. Security officials warned him not to start a new church.

Osama Saeed Musa Kodi was taken into custody where officials told him that Christianity is “evil” and accused him of trying to “brainwash Sudanese citizens with the help of Christian organizations.” They also threatened to kill him if he continued his church-planting work.

Osama, president of a Christian youth organization, has supported a Sudanese church after their building was destroyed by arson. After talking with local Muslim leaders, authorities withdrew permission for reconstruction of the church building.

Osama’s arrest and the permit withdrawal show the need to support believers in Sudan who still face life-threatening persecution in a country that remains heavily influenced by Muslim extremists.

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**Pray for protection and provision—and that God would make a way for others to hear about his unconditional love.**

**Pray God would intervene in these attempts to block Sudanese people from hearing His word. Pray specifically for Osama Saeed Musa Kodi as he faces charges and these death threats.**
Advocacy for Iran

For many Americans, the mention of Iran in the news evokes thoughts of extremist religious leaders, strict Sharia law and nuclear weapons. It’s mentioned in the same sentence as North Korea and generally regarded as an enemy of the United States. Here in Washington D.C., Iran is the subject of seemingly endless debate, and you can probably find a seminar on how to address the “issue” of Iran on any given week of the year.

Yet when I think of Iran, the first thing that comes to mind is sitting on a small grassy hill in a small town in Turkey, listening as Iranian Christians raised their voices in prayer and thanksgiving. Having all fled their homeland, usually under extremely difficult circumstances, they thanked God for protecting and providing for them, and they prayed for the many family and friends they had left behind.

This visit, which took place a few years ago, completely transformed how I thought of Iran. Instead of a persecuting regime and its victims, I saw incredible people whose lives were filled with hope and joy. It reminded me that the people of Iran, even those who don’t share our faith, are not the same thing as the government of Iran, where a few in power have kept a stranglehold over the nation for 40 years. This is a critical realization as we seek to advocate for the persecuted in Iran, if only because it helps us to realize many Iranian people seek the same freedom of religion we are advocating for.

The second critical realization is Iran is not North Korea or Eritrea. The Iranian regime does not have the same level of totalitarian control over society, nor is it as immune from the influence of Europe and the United States. Advocacy can make a critical difference, and sometimes does.

The two areas where this is most clear are in the cases of religious prisoners of conscience and in aiding Iranian refugees, like the ones I met in Turkey a few years ago. Christian leaders in Iran like Youcef Nadarkhani and Saeed Abedini were both freed after extensive international advocacy on their behalf. Although Youcef has since faced renewed persecution, advocacy helped avert a death sentence and bought years of time for him to continue his ministry.

For Iranian refugees, the Lautenberg Amendment is a key piece of U.S. legislation. Originally passed to facilitate the safe passage of Jews out of the Soviet Union, it was updated in 2004 to speed the process of getting Iranian religious minorities to safety. In the years since, hundreds of Christians have found refuge in safe countries thanks to the amendment. Unfortunately, the process was stalled in 2018 and advocacy is needed to get the program running again.

In the years ahead, Open Doors USA will continue to raise the cases of religious prisoners of conscience, push for Iranian refugees to be provided safe passage, and will call on the Iranian regime to end major religious freedom violations. As we do so, we need the church in America to join us, and to remember that the people of Iran are holding out hope we won’t forget them.
What ‘I surrender all’ means in Iran

One family lost almost everything for Jesus. Was it worth it?

By Robert Kenna
The night we arrive, Donya* offers us baklava, fresh oranges and cashews. “Eat, eat!” she says in Farsi. “You’re our honored guests.”

“You’re so kind,” I say. “You shouldn’t have done all this.”

“The tea is coming, too. Please, eat! We can’t believe you came to see us,” she says as she motions with her hands and slides the plate closer to us.

Our translator, Hashem, leans over to me and says, “Have you heard about Iranian taarof?” he asks with a smile. “It’s hard to translate into English. It’s about lifting up the other person in social interactions. Sometimes it can go back and forth for a long time. Donya is taarof-ing. This is a very important part of our culture.”

We smell the tea before it enters the room. We hold the small tulip-shaped glasses by the rim and sip. It warms us. We peel the oranges together and talk and eat.

Donya, her husband Taher* and their two daughters—Farah* and Arezoo*—all sit around the living room of their small apartment. It’s sparse, with just a few family pictures covering the white walls. As refugees from Iran in Turkey, they live in poverty with no financial support. They could get deported at any time. They have no healthcare, and they’re not even allowed to find legal employment. These challenges force Iranian refugees like Taher to find work on the black labor market, where managers can easily (and often do) take advantage of them.

Why are they refugees? How did they end up in Turkey?

Their situation can be explained in one word: Jesus.

Iran is No. 8 on the 2021 World Watch List of the most dangerous countries in the world for Christians. Believers there are often harassed, arrested and even imprisoned by the Iranian secret service for “crimes against the government.”

Today, there are an estimated 800,000 secret believers in the country—believers just like Taher and his family.

Over the next few days we spend with Taher, Donya, Farah and Arezoo, we eat many meals together—and I discover I love ghormeh sabzi, a traditional Iranian dish. We also share many stories, we laugh a lot, we cry a little and we play games of Uno between our conversations about their story. It’s an honor to spend time with other Christians who have truly given up all their material possessions and risked their very lives to follow Jesus.

But they aren’t superheroes. They aren’t that different from you or me. They just fell in love with the Lord and decided nothing in the world could steal their joy.

This is their story.
Finding Jesus in Iran
Growing up as a strict Muslim in Iran, Taher always felt like there was something more—something he was missing in his life. But it wasn’t until his youngest daughter, Farah, became deathly ill with stomach issues that things dramatically changed.

Taher and Donya took Farah to many Muslim leaders for prayer and healing, but nothing helped. Desperate to see their 10-year-old daughter survive, Donya asked some Christian friends she knew to pray for Farah. They met together, and these believers put their hands on her daughter as they prayed. Shortly after this special gathering, God miraculously healed Farah. After this moment, Donya left Islam to follow Jesus, but Taher still wasn’t convinced.

“I was looking for mistakes to prove to my wife that the path she took was wrong,” Taher shares.

As time went on, Taher let other Christians into their home. “After a while, I decided to participate in one of their services in order to find mistakes in their beliefs. I wanted to find flaws in their character and point them out to my wife and forbid her to go to these gatherings,” Taher says.

But during one of these unique worship times in his home, something surprising happened. Taher said a small prayer before he confronted the believers in the room. “I said to myself: ‘Jesus, if you are real, you should touch me today.’”

A few moments later, one of the Christians asked Taher if they could pray for him. He agreed and they gathered around him. That moment forever changed his life. During the prayer time, Taher heard and felt the power of the gospel. “It was like that burden came off my shoulders,” Taher shares. “The burden I thought I would have to give an account for my sins when I died came off. It felt like I was flying. It was the most beautiful moment of my life.”

From that day forward, he was a follower of Jesus—and he committed to surrender everything. But for a Muslim in Iran, a country where it’s illegal to convert from Islam, this was no small decision. And soon, this commitment would be put to the test.

“I said to myself: ‘Jesus, if you are real, you should touch me today.’"
A savior for the handcuffed

Taher heard about the raids on Christian homes by the Iranian secret police, but he was willing to take the risk to continue to meet with other believers and share his faith, secretly, with his friends and co-workers. “I was just so passionate,” he says. He even ordered CDs with Christian literature and discipleship materials to share with other seekers.

One morning, while Taher was at his job at a textile factory, a job he held for 20 years, he received an urgent call. There was a deep, strange voice on the other end: “Taher, you need to come home, now!” It was the secret police. They were in his home.

Donya was at home that morning. “The man at the door told me he was a postal worker,” she remembers. “When I opened the door, he put his foot down so I couldn’t close it.” The secret police burst into the home, insulted Donya and ushered Farah and Arezoo into the living room. The police turned over tables, went through drawers and ransacked the home, looking for any evidence of their Christian faith.

“[In our house church] we used to sing ‘I Surrender All,’” Donya says, “and we always asked each other, ‘Are you ready and willing to surrender everything to Jesus?’”

As the secret police tore through her house, Donya told the Lord: “I’m ready to surrender everything.”

When Taher walked into the house, the authorities rushed to put him in handcuffs and wrapped a blindfold around his head. They led Taher through the door, put him in a car and drove away. “Right then and there, I felt Jesus beside me,” Taher says.

Confronting the real cost of discipleship

For the next week, the secret police interrogated Taher from midnight until 4 a.m. every night—and at different times throughout the day.

**WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU MEET WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS?**

**WHAT SONGS DO YOU SING?**

**WHAT ORGANIZATION ARE YOU WORKING FOR?**

**ARE YOU RECEIVING MONEY FROM ISRAEL?**

**WHAT ARE THE NAMES OF ALL THE OTHER CHRISTIANS?**

**WRITE DOWN THEIR NAMES!**

When they weren’t interrogating Taher, they threw him back in the tiny cell. It was the same horrific routine, day and night.

In his small, 3x6-foot prison cell in Iran, Taher would lean against the cold block wall and quietly sing. The song was the hymn his family often sang when their secret house church gathered. The
sound bounced off the walls; each word he sang empowered Taher with peace and boldness.

**ALL TO JESUS I SURRENDER**
**ALL TO HIM I FREELY GIVE**
**I WILL EVER LOVE AND**
**TRUST HIM**
**IN HIS PRESENCE DAILY LIVE**
**I SURRENDER ALL**
**I SURRENDER ALL**

When the guards came to get him, to drag him to the interrogation room for yet another round of abuse, he felt ready. Before Taher left the interrogation room one night, he quietly slid a pen from the table into his pocket. Sharing this part of his story brings a smile to Taher’s face. When they returned him to his cell, he began to scribble in the cracks of the wall. “Ask, seek, knock, and it will be given to you,” he wrote on the wall near the floor, with the reference to Matthew 7:7.

He desperately hoped these words and the other verses he etched into the prison block walls would encourage Christians just like him—believers from Iran who would be arrested and find themselves in this same cell. Perhaps these faint messages would give others courage to stay strong in the face of their interrogators.

But things got worse. At one point, the guards took Taher to a cell block with murderers, rapists and dangerous criminals. There, they asked him: “Is this where you want your kids to go? In here with them? This is where they’ll end up. You need to cooperate and give us the names, now!”

As Taher shares this memory, a flood of emotion overwhelms him. He pulls his hands up over his eyes and begins to cry and shake. In these moments of silence, I feel the weight of his time in prison. The full weight of persecution. We break from our interview and sit in silence for a few minutes. My teammate and I place our hands on Taher and begin to pray. It’s all we know how to do.

After about 10 minutes, we ask him what he’d like to do. We want to be careful not to add to Taher’s trauma by making him relive these nightmares. But he says: “Please, let me continue. I want to share my story.”

Taher knew he couldn’t control what happened to his family. As a father, all he wanted to do was protect them. It was the greatest test of his faith, but Taher still didn’t break. He knew his wife and kids had sung the same song: “I surrender all,” and he knew they wanted him to stand strong for Jesus. “I never gave up one name,” Taher says.

‘I’m with you to the end’
The secret service eventually released Taher on bail. After his release, Taher reunited with his family, but the persecution didn’t stop. When he tried to go back to work, he was let go. “My employer told me I was defiled and dirty for being a Christian,” he says.

Donya adds: “Our phones were tapped, and there was always a car in front of our home. They had us under heavy surveillance. We knew that the secret service was watching us.”

Months later, Taher was summoned to the courtroom to stand before a judge. The judge told Taher he had rebelled against the government by promoting evangelical Christianity, and, because he was a Muslim who became a Christian, his sentence should be execution. But before the judge could give his sentence, Taher asked for a short recess. During this recess, he met with his wife in the stairwell of the courthouse.

“Are you willing to continue on the path we took, even if it gets harder? Will you stay with me,” he asked, “even if I never denounce Jesus?”

“I’m with you to the end,” Donya said.

Then they prayed together, committing their decision to the Lord. If the judge asked him to deny Jesus, he would refuse. Miraculously, during his sentencing, the judge decided to have mercy on Taher and released him under one condition—Taher was ordered to stop evangelizing. If the authorities arrested him again, the judge would have no leniency, and the conviction would be execution.
Life in Turkey is extremely difficult and challenging. Their decision to follow Jesus didn’t just spark persecution in Iran—the trickle-down effects of their faith have made their future unknown. Like thousands of Iranian refugees in Turkey, they are people with few to no rights as citizens. But even during these struggles, the joy they have in Christ overflows.

Taher has forgiven his interrogators and isn’t bitter about his time in prison or how the secret service treated him. “The time that I had with Jesus in prison was the real freedom for me,” he says.

Taher also hopes the small messages he wrote on his cell walls are still there to encourage other prisoners to seek Jesus and surrender all.

When I ask if it was worth it—losing all their material possessions, their home, work, friends and family, and leaving their country—Donya tells me: “Jesus is worth everything and, in my opinion, we have not paid any price yet.”

“I would give even more. It’s still worth it,” Taher adds.

On the last day of our visit, we pack up our gear and pray together in a circle. We prolong our visit with one last cup of tea. There are tears before we leave. “We wish you could stay longer,” Donya says. “Letting us share our stories has reminded us of all that God has done in our lives.”

As we wave our goodbyes, I’m reminded about just how special it is to be with our persecuted brothers and sisters—as One Church and One Family. To sit, to share tea, to have a meal. To be the recipient of the family’s taroof, knowing they joyfully serve even as they have very little.

I wish everyone could have the chance to spend time with Taher and his family—to experience their passion for the Lord and the joy they have in the midst of suffering and persecution. When we experience these connections with our persecuted family—whether it’s through sharing stories, dedicated prayer time or even sending encouraging letters—something powerful happens to strengthen the Body of Christ. Something beyond this world. Something eternal. Beautiful. As I walk away, the hymn “I Surrender All” echoes in my ears with new meaning.

Please continue to lift up Taher and his family in earnest prayer. Their future is uncertain, but their faith is strong. And please continue to pray for secret believers across the Muslim world who follow Jesus at great risk today. 🌍
Though it sounds like something out of a spy movie, Saghar’s story is something every secret believer in Iran has to plan for.
And then, the unavoidable happened: The secret service raided the church.

The officers entered the apartment where the house church members were meeting. They forced the door open with a crowbar but didn’t raise their voices to avoid the attention of the neighbors. They were silent in their aggression and focused on their objective.

Before any of the church members realized what was happening, women were pushed into one room, men into another. The church members looked at their leader, their eyes full of fear. Their faces asked: What will happen to us?

Every Christian in Iran knows what might happen if they’re caught worshiping outside the small number of carefully monitored registered churches. House churches are regularly raided by police, and dozens of Christians end up in prison each year. During interrogations, the security officers lie to believers, entice them to give up the names of other worshipers or church leaders, and work to destroy the church from within. The raid in Saghar’s church was no different.

Ready for the inevitable

More and more Iranian Christians hold meetings to prepare for this inevitability, to share and learn about the practical and emotional ways to endure a raid with as little damage as possible. Just a few months before the raid on her church, Saghar had attended such a meeting.

In the blink of an eye, theory became reality. Saghar entered the living room where she was called for interrogation. The room was full of burly men, one of them was filming everything. Saghar was terrified. But she tried to calm herself down: This was happening, and she couldn’t change it. She had a church to take care of.

Still, shivering with fear, lessons from the persecution preparation meeting came back to her mind. She had to let someone outside the apartment know about what was happening—for prayer and for advocacy. “Can I go to the restroom?” she asked the friendliest officer.

In the restroom, Saghar grabbed her phone, snapped a selfie and sent it to the outside world: “Please pray for us, our church is being raided!” She started deleting evidence and contacts from her phone. One of the female officers began to push on the bathroom door, trying to force it open. Saghar had learned that police have no legal right to enter, so she firmly told the officer about her rights, making the officer back out, reluctantly.

Her knowledge continued to pay off. When the officers told Saghar she was going to be arrested, she asked for the warrant and stopped the secret service officers from taking her to prison immediately. When they told her they had intercepted her passport—which was in the mail for administrative reasons—she didn’t believe it. Sure enough, the next day, she went to the post office and found her passport there.

She also knew she would need to flee. If she was actually taken to jail, she knew she could face unthinkable prison conditions, torture and continued misery.

And so, with legs shaking in fear, Saghar arrived at the airport just three days later.
‘You will not be burned’

She knew it would be a miracle if she was able to leave. The warrant to arrest her was surely ready. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw who was in the line she was in: one of the secret agents who had raided her house a few days ago.

This was the toughest moment in her life.

And there she was: all alone, no family, no fellow Christians to help her. In that moment, she realized only God could help her. Her only companions were the Bible verses she had memorized before her Bible was taken in the raid. The words of Isaiah 43:2 rang in her head: “When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.”

And so, Saghar stepped forward to board the plane. And while she could feel the agent’s eyes staring at her, a miracle happened: Saghar was allowed to board the plane. Only later did Saghar find out that the moment she boarded the plane, the security service in the airport had called her name. They had just received the warrant for her arrest.

But they were too late. Saghar’s plane took off safely.

Please pray for us, our church is being raided!” —the text message Saghar risked everything to send in the middle of the raid on her church
Four years later

“I wouldn’t be sitting here talking to you if it wasn’t for my preparation,” Saghar tells us. It’s four years after her escape from Iran, and we meet her in the country she now lives in—a place where she can worship freely. “At the gathering with the other believers, I learned how to manage my emotions and what my rights are. That the officers sometimes lie to spread disunity.”

It wouldn’t be safe to disclose much about Saghar’s former house church. But the church went through their trials together. They didn’t believe the lies the officers told them: that they had no right to meet each other anymore, or that Saghar had betrayed them. “The first thing the security services want is to de-unify us,” she explains, “but staying together [really helped] us in these times. Fellowship is essential for growth.”

Saghar wants to emphasize that a miraculous escape story doesn’t mean the event didn’t leave its marks: The first year in her new country, she had the same nightmare about the raid each night. And that is just one of the many scars she still bears.

“No Christian should face persecution unprepared, and no Christian should go through it without prayer from the worldwide Church.”
After four years of healing, Saghar is now doing relatively well again. But at times, flashbacks still haunt her. She knows it would have been much worse if she would have gone to prison.

How can we help? “Pray!” says Saghar, reminding us prayer was important enough for her to send out a call for prayer in the middle of the raid. “No Christian should face persecution unprepared, and no Christian should go through it without prayer from the worldwide Church.”
Carolyn Loven
Supporter

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.
I live in Kingsburg, California, the “Swedish village.” I’m a widow, a mom, grandma and great-grandma. My interesting vocation was serving and cooking at a drugstore soda fountain. I continue to volunteer at a Christian food bank, and have for 40 years. Now, gardening gives me great pleasure.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?
Many years ago, a family member worked at Open Doors and introduced us to your ministry. I was very interested in and prayed for the smuggling of Bibles into closed countries.

WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?
It breaks my heart to realize the horrible persecution that our brothers and sisters endure in North Korea and also the Middle East.

HOW DO YOU SERVE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH THROUGH OPEN DOORS?
About 40 years ago, when we heard about Open Doors, we “put out a fleece,” asking God if He wanted us to begin donating. He showed us in a miraculous way that we should give, and I continue to do so. Also, a gift annuity has been a great thing for both Open Doors and for me.

WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT HELPING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?
It is such a privilege to be able to pray for our brothers and sisters in places where there is persecution or lack of food and housing. And when we are able to give financially, God always blesses in some way.

Carolyn Loven
Kingsburg, California

Dave & Juliana Gordon
Connectors

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF.
We have been married 25 years. Dave is a senior pastor for a church in Southern California. Juliana is a communications manager for the church, and a writer.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME AWARE OF PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?
Dave was on a team in the 1990s that distributed Bibles in a country where Bibles had not been allowed for decades. After seeing one woman’s joyful tears over having her own copy of God’s Word, he was inspired to see to it that every Christian who wanted to have a Bible could have one. Juliana later read Brother Andrew’s book God’s Smuggler and was inspired by the stories of smuggling Bibles into closed countries. Feeling for the persecuted Christians who shared our faith but not our freedom, we looked for ways to help them together.

WHAT’S A PLACE YOU HAVE A HEART FOR?
We have a heart for the country of Iran because the demand and desire for Bibles is so high. The people are hungry for God. We want to be part of bringing His Word to these Christian brothers and sisters.

HOW DO YOU SERVE THE PERSECUTED CHURCH THROUGH OPEN DOORS?
Together, we help organize the One Hope Concert, a local worship concert that raises money for Bibles. Since 2008, this concert has raised over $250,000 for Bibles for persecuted Christians. It has also helped raise awareness about persecuted Christians and led more people to pray for them.

WHAT’S ONE PIECE OF ENCOURAGEMENT YOU’D OFFER TO OTHERS ABOUT HELPING THE PERSECUTED CHURCH?
The persecuted church needs you! God has given you gifts that can be used to help persecuted Christians. With us, Dave is more outgoing while Juliana prefers to work behind the scenes, and this translates to how we work on projects together. We love that there are opportunities to volunteer for Open Doors that use our strengths and gifts.
“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

“Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?”

— Acts 2:1-8

For believers like Kouroush,* following Jesus has meant having to start over. He is an Iranian Christian, and he was forced to flee his home after the secret service continued to target him. He had endured arrest, torture and imprisonment in Iran, but when he fled to Turkey, he found a new, more subtle challenge. “It was some kind of fear, mixed with sadness and confusion about why I was here: I lost everything,” he says. “My job, my family, my country.”

Many Iranian believers forced to leave their country end up in Turkey—and they face the same questions Kouroush asked. He wanted a place to feel at home again, talk to people in his own language, share his story and grow in faith. “And I am not the only one,” Kouroush says. “Finding such a place is one of the biggest challenges for any Iranian refugee.”

That safe space Kouroush missed when he arrived in Turkey is what he now creates for others through a center for Iranian refugees. They provide hope, a library full of Farsi books, biblical counseling and a space where an Iranian refugee can simply talk about his or her experience following Jesus. It’s a place that has required the full family of God, built with donations and prayers from Christians around the world. It’s like the stories in Acts in modern days—believers worshiping the same Jesus in every tongue, united in the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. “Without the international family of God, we wouldn’t have been able to establish this center,” Kouroush says. “I feel like God’s hand was in this: He brought us all together.”

PRAY

Almighty God, thank You for giving believers like Kouroush a way out of danger from their home in Iran. Please encourage them as they face life in a new place; protect them from loneliness, and help them to grow in faith and courage. Please bless the center built by Kouroush and his church. Help it to grow and serve the Iranian Christian community, and to strengthen Your people to spread the gospel. Through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.
What the American church is missing

By David Curry, CEO of Open Doors USA

I know this only from spending time with brothers and sisters who have lived the difference I’m talking about. In the Middle East—places like Egypt, Iran and Syria—there is a revival happening that no person, no government, no militant force can stop. And it bears little resemblance to the kind of revival we often think of here in the United States.

In their world, there are no tent meetings or stadiums full of people. Few, if any, believers have ever experienced churches loaded to capacity, or even seen a sermon illustrated with videos and background lighting. What their movement lacks in polish, it makes up for in health, authenticity and commitment.

The difference is a church under fire. It’s a people who know too well what’s truly worth sacrificing for: the truth of Scripture, the importance of community and the unity of the Body of Christ.

The truth of Scripture comes into sharper focus in these parts of the Middle East, where Islamic culture and beliefs are preeminent. The deep faithfulness of the Muslim community to Islam forces Christians to commit just as deeply to Jesus. Many have puzzled over how we in the West can hold the truth and timelessness of the Bible in such apathy—or even contempt.

Believers in this region have also counted the cost of community. Many have no choice but to meet only in small groups, if at all. Some resort only to brief, one-on-one encounters over lunch or tea, or to church meetings disguised as dinner parties. But still they rely on spiritual support at a deeply personal level, knowing these friendships are vital to the health of their faith—no matter the price they must pay to continue.

And because their numbers are few, they know how crucial it is to fight back division, wherever it may creep in. The believers who spark and sustain revival are not the ones primarily concerned with theological quibbles and denominations—they know those were never God’s idea. The believers who are truly experiencing the ongoing and living presence of Jesus are those who chase relentlessly after the essentials: the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. The availability of Jesus to all people, right now—even today—no matter the objection.

Those that focus on this single, unifying idea, resisting the temptation to give into divisions: These are the churches that are spreading revival. We, in the United States, have so much to learn from them. I pray we already are.
Give a gift that keeps on giving!

Many Christians desire to leave a legacy that will help their favorite charities, like Open Doors—and leave a Christian testimony when they pass on.

Here's how

Simply name Open Doors as a beneficiary of your assets or estate. You’ll have the joy of leaving a gift for persecuted Christians, and you’ll also save on estate and income taxes. It’s a wonderful way to support your persecuted sisters and brothers, and to secure your financial future.

For more information, please contact Karen Schneider at 800-659-5965, visit OpenDoorsUSA.org/PlannedGiving or email her at karens@odusa.org
Text PRAYER to 32500
to download the Pray for the Persecuted App from Open Doors

Message and data rates may apply