RELEASE INTERNATIONAL

JUL-SEPT 2020

of Persecuted Christians

HOW YOUR SUPPORT HELPS CHRISTIAN PRISONERS OF FAITH

News, stories and prayer requests from persecuted Christians around the world



In these unusual times, our experience of lockdown brought about by Covid-19 has enabled – or forced – many of us to gain a deeper spiritual insight into the lives of our persecuted family.

Being unable to hold our usual Sunday services has been unsettling for many. Of course, we know that – sooner or later – the current restrictions will lift, and our lives will return to some degree of normality.

Believers in restricted nations do not have that luxury.

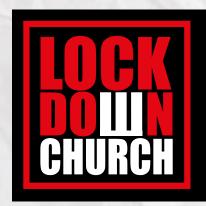
In fact, our international partners tell us that persecuted Christians in many countries are now facing significantly increased pressures because of the devastating social and economic impact of coronavirus (see page 18).

'This is a great opportunity for the church to show our compassion, to reach out to those in need and share the love of Jesus Christ,' our ministry partner Kumar in India told us. In Pakistan our partner Waseem is providing food and practical support to the families of Christian prisoners and struggling brick kiln workers.

Lockdown also reminds us of those courageous believers who are locked up because of their bold witness for Christ – the theme of this magazine.

My own faith is constantly challenged as I read their striking testimonies, such as these from prisoners of faith in **China** (page 12), **Pakistan** (page 10), **India** (page 16), **Iran** and the **Middle East** (pages 14 and 15) and repressive **Eritrea** (page 6).

These challenging times have indeed given us a new and deeper perspective – one I pray we will always remember. Please remember too 'those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering' (Hebrews 13:3).



Our free Lockdown Church resources are ideal for use in your church's online services, for sharing in your prayer group – or your own personal devotion. See page 18 and releaseinternational.org/lockdown.



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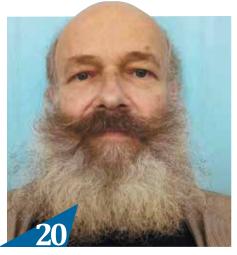


Middle Eastern Christian Ezra is set free





SPECIAL RESOURCES for you and your church



IMPRISONED WITH ISIS New book by Release associate Petr Jasek



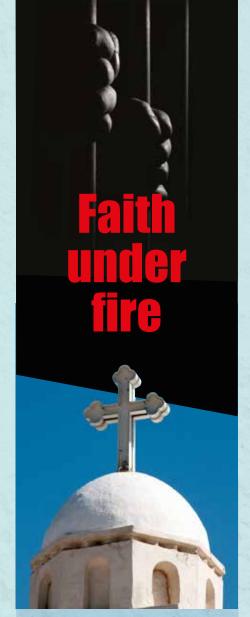


The surprising message of the New Testament

Release helps Christians in the UK and Ireland to actively engage with their persecuted brothers and sisters around the world: praying with them, standing with them, helping them, and learning lessons of true Christian discipleship with them.

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Church buildings legalised in Egypt

The Egyptian authorities legalised 70 church buildings for worship in May – bringing the total number legalised since 2016 to 1,638.

While this is welcome news, local authorities also continue to demolish church property.

For example, in May a church building was destroyed in Koum Al-Farag, Al-Behera governate, according to CSW. The single storey building had been used for worship purposes for the past 15 years.

• Thank God for these continuing legalisations, and pray for an end to all unnecessary demolitions.

Sign up to Release





From left: Pastor Victor, his wife Shamiram and Ismaeil Maghrebinejad. Photos: Middle East Concern.

Continuing crackdown in Iran

An appeal hearing to review the cases of Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, his wife Shamiram Issavi Khabizeh and three Christian converts has been cancelled.

These cases had been combined in a ruling by presiding judge Ahmed Zargar in February 2019, with the last appeal scheduled for June 1. Between them, these believers are facing 55 years in prison on national security charges.

However, when Pastor Victor and Shamiram went to Branch 36 of the Islamic Revolutionary Court in Tehran along with their lawyers and legal representatives for the Christian converts, they were told that the hearing had been cancelled. No reason was given and the lawyers were not allowed to approach the judge.

Since the decision to combine these cases, every scheduled hearing has failed to take place. The on-going judicial proceedings, delays and postponements continue to be very stressful for the defendants and their families.

Christian convert Ismaeil Maghrebinejad, 65, also attempted to appeal against his two-year sentence – for 'membership of a group hostile to the regime'.

His crime, according to our partner Middle East Concern, was only to receive a Bible verse from a Christian media organisation. The government accused the organisation of promoting 'Evangelical Zionist Christianity', which is not tolerated.

Instead of a reprieve, though, Maghrebinejad was given an additional one-year sentence for 'propaganda against the state'. This followed a three-year sentence in January for 'insulting Islamic sacred beliefs' after he responded to a posting on social media deemed critical of the clergy – with a smiley face emoji.

Released

Despite these disappointing developments, some believers have been released early due to Covid-19 concerns. Muslim-background believers Amin Khaki, Rokhsareh (Mahrokh) Ghanbari and Fatemeh Bakhteri had been released temporarily on bail of several thousand dollars – but as the coronavirus spread, the authorities told them not to return to prison.

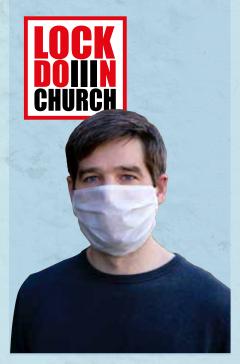
Read more about Iran on page 14.

• Please continue to pray for all these Iranian Christians who are suffering because of their faith. Pray that those in prison will be released soon.



Don't miss our latest audio podcasts, available from releaseinternational.org/podcast or via your favourite podcast app. Our latest editions include:

- Central Asia: Release partners
 Hugh and Barbara are using
 radio to introduce people
 to Jesus. In many ways
 Central Asia's rural world
 of storytelling and family
 dynamics has close parallels
 to the ancient world of Jesus
 and his disciples.
- Lockdown in the UK and Ireland: Release workers Kenneth, James and Stephen talk about how the restrictions are impacting and bringing innovation to the UK-facing work of Release and how the experiences of persecuted Christians can help us to cope with the challenges of lockdown.



INCREASING PERSECUTION IN CHINA



Xiangbaishu Church, Jiangsu province, was destroyed in March. Photo: China Aid.

The Chinese authorities have stepped up their persecution of unofficial and official churches alike.

Authorities have banned online services and preaching, and officials have also accelerated their programme to remove and demolish crosses from church buildings, according to Release partner China Aid. Pastors have also been detained for organising online prayer meetings.



Members of the stateapproved Donghu Church. Photo: China Aid.

Our partner reports that the authorities demolished at least two churches at Easter. Officials tore down the state-sanctioned Donghu Church in Qinghai province, the oldest and largest in its district – and a private home used for a house church in Hunan province.

Donghu Church had 300 members and was the oldest and largest church in its district. The building was demolished due to alleged 'safety concerns'.

However, China Aid says the Christians refuse to be dismayed. 'The government can destroy the building, but they can never destroy the faith in their hearts.'

Our partner also reports that several members of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan, were arrested at home on Good Friday as they watched online services.

Meanwhile, Beijing lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who has been detained since 2009 and has suffered appalling torture, has been awarded the Lin Zhao Freedom Award.

The prize is given to Chinese human rights activists who suffer persecution for promoting freedom and the rule of law. Gao has not been seen since 2017 when he made an attempt to escape house arrest.

Read more about China on page 12.

 Pray that these restrictions on Chinese churches will be lifted, and for the release of Gao Zhisheng.

Fulani militants kill seventeen in Nigeria

Fulani militants have continued their killing spree in north and central Nigeria with a brutal attack on a Christian village in Kaduna.

Release partners say 17 people died – including a couple and their three children – in a midnight raid in May on Gonan Rogo village, near Makyali.

Villagers were asleep when the attackers set upon them with guns and knives. Seven children were among the dead. Six people were injured, including a baby whose skull was penetrated by a bullet that killed her mother.

Release partner Stefanos Foundation says that the armed group met with no resistance, despite the presence of a military checkpoint nearby. Press reports suggested the militants killed another six people in nearby villages.

• Ask God to heal the injured and comfort those who are mourning in Gonan Rogo.



...says courageous believer Pastor Tesfahans – despite being imprisoned five times in Eritrea because of his Christian faith. Release's Marian reports on a visit to northern Ethiopia.

Early this year, in a small town in northern Ethiopia, 37 Eritrean Christians gathered for three days of discipleship training, led by a Release partner.

These 30 men and seven women are all in active Christian ministry, with most serving as pastors. The training was to enable them not just to survive as persecuted Christians, but to thrive: to be strengthened in faith and equipped for ministry. Most had experienced some form of trauma.

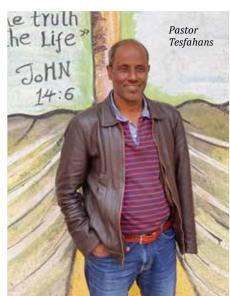
It was my privilege to join them and to learn from their experience of persecution.

Throughout the training there was

an emphasis on remembering the promises of God – especially the promise of Romans 8:28:

'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.'

Eritrea is a small country on the Horn of Africa, sometimes known as the North Korea of Africa because of the repressive regime and the persecution experienced there by Christians. In May 2002, President Isaias Afewerki closed many churches in Eritrea and severely restricted religious freedom, especially for evangelical Christians.



During the training I was introduced to Pastor Tesfahans, a bold believer. Despite the restrictions to religious freedom, he spent many years in ministry in Eritrea, before fleeing with his family to Ethiopia in the summer of 2019.



Although he was arrested and imprisoned five times, he told me how the Lord worked things which were intended to harm him to his good.

For example, one spring Pastor Tesfahans decided to relocate his family to Asmara, the capital city, for relief from the heat during the hottest months of the year, while he would remain in Massawa on the Red Sea coast.

Having accompanied his wife and family safely to Asmara, he returned home. But as soon as he arrived, he received a telephone call from his wife who had suddenly been taken ill. Without delay, he took a bus to Asmara to be with her. On his arrival, his wife became well again instantly, for which he praised the Lord!

Later that evening, however, he received an anxious phone call from Christians in Massawa, wondering where he was. Unbeknown to Pastor



Since 2002 President Isaias Afewerki has banned independent and pentecostal churches in Eritrea and imprisoned thousands of believers.

Tesfahans that very afternoon, secret police had rounded up many Christians in Massawa and asked specifically about his whereabouts. He praises God that his wife's illness was used to save him from prison on this occasion, so he could continue his vital ministry.

Another time, the pastor told me how God had spoken to him as he prepared for bed one night. The Lord reminded him of words from Jeremiah 36:26, 'But the Lord had hidden them.' Unsure what this meant, Pastor Tesfahans replied 'Amen' in agreement.

Throughout the next day this verse kept coming to his mind. Later in the day, he went out to meet secretly with other Christians. That evening, police surrounded his house and knocked on the door. His wife explained that her husband was not at home, and that he had left several hours earlier.

'Yet again, God had worked out His purposes and kept Pastor Tesfahans and his family safe'

After asking her many questions, most of the police left, stationing a few outside to wait for his return. She called her husband. The children were frightened, what should she do? Should they try to leave by the back

door? Pastor Tesfahans was reminded again of the words the Lord had given him the night before. He reassured his wife to stay where she was – the Lord would hide them.

He then prayed that God would send an angel to frighten the police away. Whether the police saw an angel or not remains a mystery, but they left and did not return! Yet again, God had worked out His purposes and kept Pastor Tesfahans and his family safe.

The pastor believes that the Lord has trained him to be bold, hence his willingness to share his testimony. Unable to spread the gospel in his beloved Eritrea, he is now involved in radio ministry in Ethiopia.

I discovered that all of those present at the training had experienced some form of trauma. Many had been imprisoned in Eritrea, with some now living in refugee camps.

On the final day of the training, Pastor Tesfahans summed up the thoughts of many. They had waited so long for God to do something new in Eritrea that some had started to act in their own strength, he said. But now they had been reminded of God's promises.

I have started to look ahead and be encouraged,' he said. I've learnt to give glory to God. I want to praise God. I've learnt about trauma – and that our fellowship is a means of healing... We are all filled with hope and faith!'

Give thanks for Pastor Tesfahans' boldness and that he and the other Eritrean Christians now have renewed hope and faith that God works for the good of those who love Him and who have been called according to His purpose.



Your support enables the training and encouragement of Eritrean Christians who have experienced persecution and trauma.



Tsedal, whose name means 'halo', is a young widow, just 32 years old, and mother of four from Eritrea.

She and her husband Ftsum married in Eritrea in 2005. As Christians, persecution came initially from her own Orthodox parents. For several years the couple were able to worship together with other Christians in small groups in homes – changing locations frequently and often meeting at night.

'I know God has His own way, but it's hard for my children and I worry about them not having a father.'

But in 2017 the secret police started to round up Christians indiscriminately from their homes and places of work. Ftsum was arrested while working at the shop he owned in Massawa and imprisoned for his faith.

It was impossible for Tsedal to visit her husband, although she tried to smuggle medication to him for his high blood pressure. In prison, her husband was seen as a man of prayer, a leader, and so the authorities put him into solitary confinement for a month.

Yet he and the other believers refused to renounce their faith. Early last year, two years after his arrest, Ftsum died in prison.

For a few months, Tsedal remained in Massawa, but life was hard. She received some support from a ministry related to a Release partner. Then the security forces spied on her, trying to discover her source of support.

Her children suffered at school, harassed by other children and the teachers for being Christians. It became too much to bear and the family moved to Asmara before escaping to Ethiopia last year. After some months in a refugee camp, Tsedal and her children are now settled in a small town, where she hopes the children will be able to go to school in September this year.

When Ftsum was arrested, God gave Tsedal the words from Isaiah 54:5, that God would be her husband. 'I never thought he'd be gone forever,' she said in tears as she shared her story. But she has confidence in God, and she trusts in Him. 'I know God has His own way, but it's hard for my children and I worry about them not having a father.'

Tsedal once asked her ten-year-old daughter to write a letter to her father in prison. 'We have a defeated enemy,' the daughter wrote, 'Satan has already lost the war!' Praise God that this young girl knows Him as her heavenly Father!

Despite her grief, Tsedal is looking to God for the future. She wants to develop a life of prayer and to do more for those who suffer persecution for their faith in Christ – something she knows all about.

Thanks to your support, Release gives practical help and pastoral care to prisoners of faith and their families inside Eritrea – as well as to Eritrean Christians living in refugee camps in northern Ethiopia.



Population: 6 million

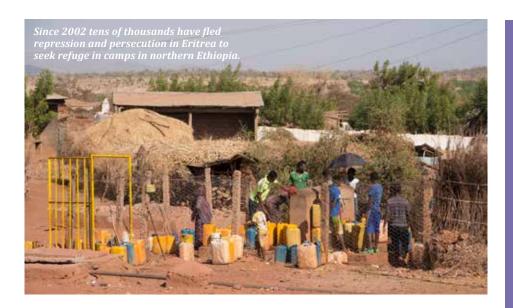
Capital: Asmara

Government: Presidential republic

Religion: Muslim 50%, Christian 47% (including 1.7% evangelical and independent), other 3%

Since 2002 all Christian groups, apart from Eritrean Orthodox, Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, have been persecuted by the authorities.

Sources: World Factbook, Operation World.



INSIDE THE NORTH KOREA OF AFRICA



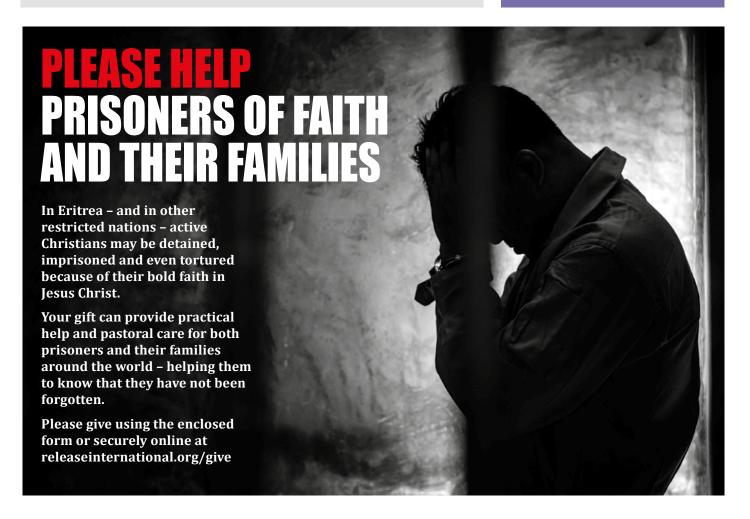
Find out more about persecution inside Eritrea from Release partner and former prisoner of faith Dr Berhane (pictured). He features in our March audio podcast, available from releaseinternational.org/podcast or via your favourite podcast app.



FIND OUT MORE



Read more inspiring testimonies from precious believers like Tsedal in *Embrace*, the newsletter of our Release Women ministry. Request your free copy by completing the enclosed form or by calling 01689 823491. Our Lockdown Church resources also feature Eritrean prisoner of faith Twen (see page 19).





Waseem, a Release partner in Pakistan, describes what happened when fellow worker Pastor Akbar was recently detained for six days by police for standing up for persecuted Christians.

Pastor Akbar is an evangelical pastor who has worked with me since 2004 as an assistant administrator in our office. He is a very bold Christian leader, strong in faith, with a passion to help persecuted believers.

One evening, when he was praying in his church, he heard a commotion in the street and decided to investigate. He discovered that several community leaders and many police were trying to take possession of a house belonging to two brothers, who were members of his own church.

Pastor Akbar told the police that he knew the owners, who had been living there for the past 20 years. He said: "How can you seize this property, worth more than two crore rupees (around £130,000)? This is discrimination against Christians."

'During this time he was mocked, humiliated and heaten'

After Akbar's bold intervention, the police immediately stopped. One officer then spoke to him privately and invited him to go to the police station to discuss the matter further.

The pastor agreed – but later that evening he was arrested and accused of interfering in police matters. The next day he was taken to prison and placed in a small, crowded cell.

During this time he was mocked, humiliated and beaten.

"This was my first, and terrible, experience in prison and I realise it is an entirely different world," he told me later.

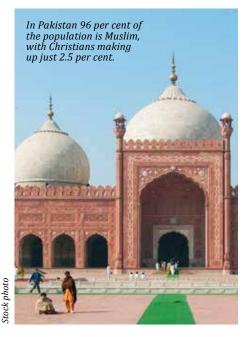
Yet despite these hardships, Pastor Akbar also had a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus with over 100 prisoners.

Read more opposite.

Our partner Waseem asks us to pray for the two brothers whose house was being targeted. This matter is now a case in the civil courts. Please pray for their protection and that they would receive justice.



Release partner Waseem also features in one of our Lockdown Church video streams (see page 18).





Population: 208 million

Capital: Islamabad

Government: Federal parliamentary republic

Religion: Muslim 95.8%, Christian 2.5%, Other 1.7%

Sources: Operation World, World Factbook.

Thanks to your support, Waseem and his associates are able to give financial assistance to Christians imprisoned because of their faith in Christ – and to their families.



Release partner Waseem (right) prays with a persecuted Christian in Pakistan.

MY TIME IN PRISON

Pastor Akbar shares the gospel with wonderful results

WEDNESDAY

This is the first time in my life I have been sent to prison. My only 'crime' was to help two of my church members whose property was being attacked by the police. Today I was mocked and beaten, after I told my fellow prisoners that I am a pastor and I have not done anything wrong.

The authorities moved me to another cell where there were already Christians. I told my story to my fellow prisoners straightaway, which was some help. Ten people were crowded into a tiny cell. It was a very cramped space; dirty, smelly and very unhygienic.

I started to talk with everyone. I found out that most of the prisoners were here for small crimes like pickpocketing, stealing, fighting and so on. I also discovered that some of the prisoners had actually completed their sentences – but had no one to help them secure their release.

In the evening I suggested we pray together, but we did not have a Bible. I recited some Psalms and sang a little, before praying for all the prisoners and even for the jail management. A guard was listening throughout and told his colleagues about our prayers for them.

THURSDAY

At 10 am we were taken to different parts of the prison to work. Everybody was assigned physical tasks. I was taken to the Superintendent who wanted to know more about me. After that I was treated much better.

5UNDAY

I asked the Superintendent for permission to hold a Sunday service, which was granted. Some 80 per cent of the Christian prisoners were allowed to take part, around 160 prisoners.

We sang psalms and hymns, and I preached for about half an hour. Some 22 prisoners repented and came to the Lord – what a joyful day! Lastly I prayed for all prisoners, their families and for the jail management. The Christians were very happy, since this was the first time a Sunday service had been held in the jail.

I was so glad and realised that this was the reason why I was in prison. I believe it was God's plan to send me to jail to be a witness for Christ – and for me to find out more about prison life by experiencing it.

Please pray for strength and protection for Release partner Waseem and his colleague Pastor Akbar. Praise God for the 22 prisoners who responded to the gospel message – pray for their ongoing discipleship and release in due course.



...said Pastor Wang Yi before the authorities sentenced him to nine years' imprisonment.

Pastor Wang Yi is the influential leader of Early Rain Covenant Church in the city of Chengdu, Sichuan province – one of the best-known house churches in China.

During a police raid in December 2018 he and his wife, Jiang Rong, were arrested and detained along with around 100 members of their church. The pastor was charged with 'inciting subversion of state power' and 'illegal business operations'.

In December 2019 he was convicted of those crimes, fined, and sentenced to nine years in prison. A former law professor, Pastor Wang has been outspoken in calling on the state to uphold religious liberties.

Anticipating his arrest, he had even prepared a letter denouncing the government for the 'horrendous evil' of religious persecution in the country.

'I am full of disgust and hatred for the Chinese Communist Party's persecution of the church, the deprivation of human faith and the freedom of conscience,' he wrote.

'The persecution of the church is an extremely evil crime. As a pastor, I must sternly and openly proclaim such sins. This calling also requires me to violate all human laws that violate the Bible and God in a non-violent form, in peace and patience. Christ, my Saviour, asks me to joyfully bear all the costs of transgressing evil laws.

'I am no longer afraid of social and political powers. Those who believe in Jesus do not do evil, and they should not fear the power of darkness... This is precisely the reason why the communist regime is full of fear for a church that no longer fears it.'

According to Wang, this persecution – while evil – is actually pushing many Chinese people to 'lose faith in their future, leading them to a desert of spiritual disillusionment and through this, to know Jesus'.

PLEASE PRAY

The Chinese government is continuing to monitor and put pressure on the Early Rain Covenant Church (ERCC).

'Since Pastor Wang was tried, convicted, and sentenced, the next event would be his move to a prison to serve his sentence,' said one of our associate ministries. 'But China always waits things out. There is no reason for them to hurry. They would rather public attention dissipate, and they know that time is the best way for that to happen.'

Please pray that God will uphold Pastor Wang and his family, and will enable the ERCC to remain strong in faith.



The Early Rain Covenant Church has held services outdoors after their church building was closed by the authorities.



Request our free *Prisoners of Faith* email alert and receive a *Prisoner Profile* with topical prayer points every quarter. Please use the attached form, visit releaseinternational.org or call: 01689 823491.



At the end of last year, Pastor Zhang's daughter Esther posted a distressing video on YouTube, reporting that her father was being force-fed unidentified medication by the authorities.

'My father was in extremely bad mental and physical state,' she told our partner China Aid.

'He was fed an unknown white tablet, which was said to control his [high] blood pressure. But in the last few visits, my family found him in a worse and worse mental and physical condition.'

The prison authorities in China often feed people targeted by the government unlabelled medication, says China Aid. 'Several lawyers who

have served time behind bars for defending the rights of a client have been made to take similar medication, which resulted in health complications.'

Zhang, a pastor from the state-recognised Nanle County Christian Church, was arrested in November 2013 after a dispute with local officials who were trying to seize church land. In July 2014, he was sentenced to 12 years in prison for allegedly 'gathering a crowd to disrupt public order' and fraud.

While he has tried to appeal his sentence, the authorities have deliberately delayed the process.

Esther Zhang recently told us: 'Due to coronavirus the family has not been

able to visit him in prison – but the good news is that he isn't experiencing as much trouble from the authorities as before.

'He has stopped taking the medicine that was causing him problems. His voice and manner are normal and his mind sounds much clearer than before. Thank God that even though so many things are set against us we never stop loving Him. Thank you for your interest and prayers.'

Please pray that God will protect Pastor Zhang and his family – and heal his high blood pressure.



Population: 1.4 billion

Capital: Beijing

Government: communist party-led

Religion: Non-religious 44%, Chinese religions 29%, Buddhist 13%, Christian 8%, other 6%

Sources: Operation World, World Factbook.



Esther Zhang posted a video to YouTube in December 2019 describing how the authorities were force-feeding her father unidentified medication.



Your support provided immediate help to 'Farah' – who suffers from multiple sclerosis – after she escaped with her family from repressive Iran.

Six years ago I heard the good news and committed my heart to Jesus Christ. I then shared the gospel with my family members and, with the exception of my father, who is a retired army colonel, my entire family gave their hearts to Jesus.

After a few years, I started to serve God in a local house church, where I met my husband. He had been serving the Lord as an evangelist, preaching and teaching the Bible. However, as a result, he was fired from his job.

All my husband's family members are Christians as well – and have suffered discrimination.

My husband's sister lost her job and was denied her pension on account of her faith. Another relative, although a student with excellent grades, was banned from going to university when her Christian identity was discovered. Her husband, an electrician, was also dismissed from his work.

After our wedding we kept serving God, until my husband and I and his family were arrested by intelligence officers. We were held in custody for seven days and then released on bail of about £40,000. We were then sentenced to one year in prison. We appealed and hired a lawyer, during which time the authorities were constantly forcing us to deny our faith.

'I'm so thankful that a Release partner has helped us financially'

Finally, though, we had to surrender ourselves to carry out the sentence. We spent almost two-and-a-

half months in prison. We were continually threatened that if we did not deny Christ we would be kept in prison beyond our sentence.

About nine years ago I had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis – and this drastically worsened in prison as I was not allowed to receive my medicine.

While on an unescorted release from the prison, I managed to escape to a neighbouring country with my family.

I'm so thankful that a Release partner has helped us financially. However, where we now live, medical costs are extremely high, and I cannot afford to buy even one dose of my regular medication.

Even with these challenges, my husband and I still have many dreams for the future. We pray to obtain medical insurance – and it is our great hope one day to have a child.

We also dream of getting approval for long-term residence, so we can focus on our relationship with Christ and study His Word without fear of deportation. Until then, we continue serving the Lord as we wait for His provision.

Please pray that God will provide for all the needs of Farah and her family, including residency and health cover.





Thank you for praying for Middle Eastern prisoner of faith Ezra – featured in our magazine last October – who was released from jail in April. Our partner tells his amazing story.

Middle Eastern believer Ezra, a former soldier, was first held captive by ISIS-related militia and then for two years by his own government.

This April, finally, we praise God that he was released. I was able to talk with him the day after and it was extraordinary: something out of the book of Acts as he recounted just a few of the Lord's deliverances.

Ezra is now back with his wife and four children, living in about the only house on his block which was not completely bombed out by three years of assault by government forces. More than ever, he is determined to serve Jesus.

It's possible that he was released because of the increased risk to guards from Covid-19.

The day after he was set free, he called me. He was almost breathless

in a torrent of thanksgiving to God – shouting, praising and laughing.

"God delivered me over and over again out of the mouth of the lion! Nothing can stop the Word of God from spreading across this land," he said.

For two years Ezra had lived in his neighbourhood under the control of ISIS-related militia. He told me how, during this time, God had saved his life on many occasions.

"They shot at me many times, but the Lord kept pushing their guns away and they missed!"

For example, one day the militia asked him to join them. He said "No". They said, "That means you are a spy for the government." He told them,

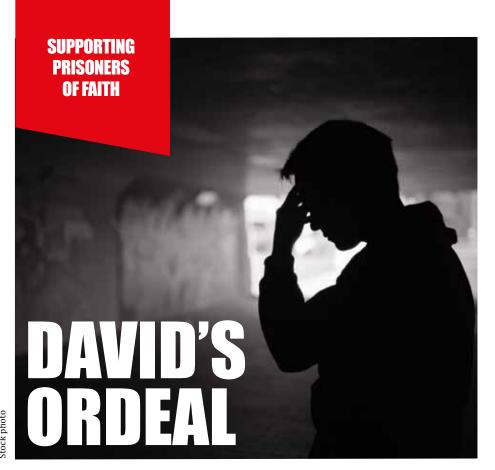
"No, I'm not a spy." "Then stay inside or we'll shoot you," they said.

"Eventually they came a second time, and insisted that I join them, but again I refused. So they said they would kill me," said Ezra.

"Two men pointed their guns right at my head, but when they went to shoot, the Lord pushed their guns to one side or the other, right into the wall. They shot at me many times, but the Lord kept pushing their guns away and they missed! They became really angry and frustrated because they couldn't shoot me! And so they left. God protected me."

Thanks to the prayers and help of Release supporters, we were able to give Ezra's family vital financial help during his captivity.

Thank God for Ezra's release. Pray for him as he re-establishes links with his community. Pray too for his wife Martha and four children who have struggled during his absence.



Prisoners of faith – such as Pastor 'David' in India – can face unexpected dangers when they are sent to prison, writes Release's Kenneth Harrod.

For the past ten years I have been in contact with persecuted pastors, but I was unaware of some of the dangers that lurk when a pastor is sent to jail.

Recently, however, one of our partners told me about a pastor in north India, 'David' (not his real name), who was falsely accused by Hindu militants. He was arrested under various sections of the Indian Penal Code and for alleged fraudulent conversion and was remanded in custody for a month.

'At the jail David was given a set of prison clothes, a bedroll and was allotted a place to set his bed on the floor in a large dormitory in the jail, among 70 other prisoners,' said our partner. 'Some were convicted, many were in judicial custody or awaiting trial.'

Often in prisons there are gangs linked to powerful criminals who intimidate and control prisoners. One of these gang leaders immediately attacked the pastor when he entered the room.

'Tell the truth: what did you do to come here?,' said the gangster. When David replied some of the inmates immediately began threatening him and mocking him for his faith in Jesus.

At that moment the fear which David felt when he was arrested paled in comparison with what he now felt in the cell.

'He kept these precious Scriptures and read them every day – finding a little relief from the mental torture.'

'His month-long experience of jail was sheer horror,' our partner told me. 'It haunts him even now whenever he remembers.'

David did not have a Bible in prison, but he found some torn pieces of one of the gospels, perhaps given to someone inside the jail previously.

He kept these precious Scriptures and read them every day – finding a little relief from the mental torture. His

mind was so disturbed inside jail that he even found it difficult to pray.

I wonder if other pastors in India have had similar experiences. Life in prison for some pastors is a horror – more terrifying even than being physically assaulted by extremists opposed to the Christian gospel.

RELEASE'S MINISTRY IN INDIA

Thanks to your support, Release's partner the All India Christian Council (AICC) provides:

- Help for Christians facing legal pressures
- Conferences to encourage pastors and leaders
- Bibles in local languages
- Medical aid for victims of violent attacks

Please pray for Pastor David and others who have committed their lives to Christ in India. Pray for pastors who find themselves remanded in custody for their bold gospel ministry. Pray for our partner AICC as it assists persecuted Christians facing these extreme challenges.



Population: 1.3 billion

Capital: New Delhi

Government: Federal parliamentary republic

Religion: Hindu 74%, Muslim 14%, Christian 6%, other 6%

Sources: Operation World, World Factbook.



Thanks to everyone who took part in our Facebook Live event *All Out for God* in May.

While we were unable to hold our usual Great Outdoors Church Service, due to Covid-19, we're glad that so many of you took part in AO4G. Our video was viewed over 2,000 times and generated lots of shares and interest!

We also appreciate your great feedback: 'fantastic worship', 'So good to stand with our brothers and sisters,' 'thank you Lord for our freedom,' plus many more.

Our heartfelt thanks go to all who made the event possible: worship leader and friend Lyanna and international partners Waseem in Pakistan, Archbishop Ben Kwashi in Nigeria and Dr Eric Foley in South Korea. We couldn't have done it without you all!

AZERBAIJANI CHURCH ALLOWED TO MEET

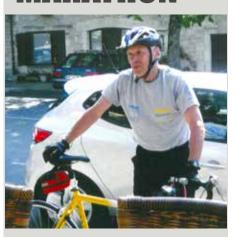


We rejoice with Pastor Hamid Shabanov (pictured) in Azerbaijan who earlier this year was informed by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations that his Baptist church in the village of Aliabad would be allowed to meet for two hours each Saturday morning.

For 25 years these brave believers have sought legal status – but were repeatedly ignored or

denied by the authorities. Police regularly raided their church meetings and seized Christian literature. However, despite the opposition, the church continued to gather for teaching and worship while attempting to get official status. We thank God for their perseverance and for this wonderful answer to prayer.

CYCLING A MARATHON



Release supporter Rev Tony Shrimpton (pictured), aged 84, cycled a total of 26 miles over one week to raise funds for Release. His super effort raised over £100 for persecuted Christians. He said, 'This seemed a good opportunity to raise some money for a cause that is so close to my heart.' Thank you Tony!



Many churches in the UK and Ireland have been using our Lockdown Church resources to share the experience of persecuted Christians with their congregations – and to see how Release partners are coping during the Covid-19 epidemic. All items are free to download or stream from release international.org/lockdown.

HOW RELEASE PARTNERS ARE COPING WITH THE EPIDEMIC



CHINA Despite doing everything to help their communities impacted by coronavirus, Christians in China are facing yet more repression at the hands of the authorities. Even online

preaching has been banned, reports Release partner Bob Fu of China Aid. *4m video stream.*



INDIA Partner Kumar Swamy of the All India Christian Council describes the impact of the epidemic and gives topical prayer points. 'We need prayer for the persecuted church in India,' he says. *7m video stream*.



NORTH KOREA Inside highly repressive North Korea, underground Christians may actually know very little about the true impact of the virus in their

country, reports Eric Foley of our associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs Korea. 'North Koreans sometimes tell me: "We're like frogs in a well..." 5m video stream.



PAKISTAN Release partner Waseem describes how his ministry is reaching out to distribute food and practical support to the families of Christian prisoners and struggling

brick kiln workers during the crisis. 5m video stream.

NIGERIA: LAMBS AMONG WOLVES



Partner Archbishop Benjamin Kwashi (pictured) recently told Release how coronavirus is just the latest challenge in Nigeria for Christians, who continue to face attacks from Boko Haram terrorists and armed Fulani militants. In the north of Nigeria where I live there have been so many killings, together with the destruction of homes, farms, properties, churches... The stories can be heartbreaking. But the gospel cannot be burnt out or destroyed.

We are sent as lambs among wolves (Luke 10:3) – but we have a gospel worth living for and a gospel worth dying for!

This is why in every generation those who are truly in Christ, and in whose lives the Lamb of God reigns, are enabled to stand before the wolves.

Today the coronavirus has caused buildings of bricks and stone to be closed. But the new and imaginative ways in which Bible teaching, worship, discipleship, Christian love and compassion are being continued, lived and developed are opening new doors, in new directions, in new lives. This is the living church!

This is God's call, and it does not depend upon buildings, health, strength, academic ability or wealth. This is God's call, and those who answer are the lambs who can face the wolf, the church which can face persecution, the nation which can face coronavirus – and win!



MEET TWEN



Twen is from Eritrea and has spent the past 15 years in prison. Her 'crime' was to take part in an evening prayer meeting. She has never been tried or sentenced and has no idea how long she will be detained.

During her imprisonment she has faced beatings and torture and

was even kept in a metal shipping container. But Twen has also used her time in prison to serve others. She has taken punishment in their place, washed their wounds and carried them when they couldn't walk. She has had opportunities to escape but each time she has been let out she has returned to serve her fellow prisoners. Her one prayer request is that God would be glorified in Eritrea.

THINK

Imagine you are Twen's fellow prisoner - her cell mate. Imagine the cold of the cell at night and the heat during the day. Imagine the aches and pains. Imagine being separated from your family. How would you feel? How would you pray? How would you want others to pray for you?



Download Twen's Prisoner Profile from releaseinter national.org/ lockdown.



Stream our one-minute video to help your church or group think about the experience of Eritrean prisoner of faith Twen.

PRISONER'S

Pastor John Cao (pictured) is currently serving a seven-year prison sentence in China. He was charged with allegedly 'organising illegal border crossings' when he and several others crossed the border between Myanmar and China. The following is part of a poem he wrote recently in prison.



You can take away my freedom, but you can't take my prayers.

My prayers have wings and leap over the iron mesh high wall.

Many brothers and sisters have heard them.

And they fly freely every day and reach heaven on the blue sky.

You can impose heavy punishments on me, but you can't hold my soul and spirit.

They are like cheerful yellowbirds, raising gentle praises toward the iron gate.

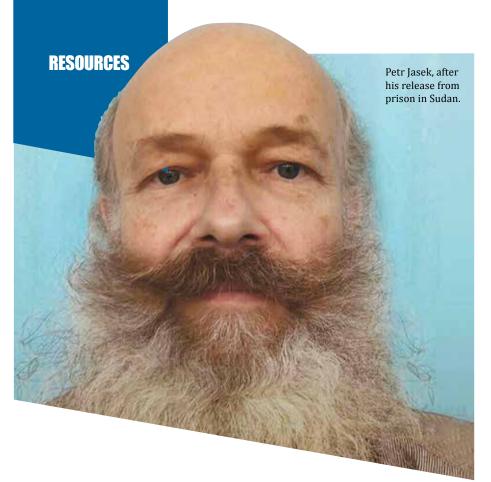
My Saviour must have heard my voice.

You can deprive me of the sun. I eat leftovers with coldness every day, But you can't extinguish the brightness that the Lord has placed in my heart.

Listen to the full poem read by Bob Fu of China Aid at releaseinternational.org/lockdown.

Check out releaseinternational.org/lockdown for the latest Lockdown Church resources You ReleaseInternational





IMPRISONED WITH ISIS

It was supposed to be a four-day visit to Sudan. It turned into a 445-day imprisonment, sometimes alongside hardened ISIS fighters. Release's Jack Norman reviews Petr Jasek's inspiring new book.

How do you prepare to be imprisoned with a group of ISIS terrorists who celebrate wildly when told of the beheading of a Christian in Nigeria?

How do you prepare for the beatings these same ISIS members inflict on you as they threaten to kill you in your cell?

This is the extreme situation described by Petr Jasek in his remarkable new book *Imprisoned with ISIS*.

Petr, from the Czech Republic, was working for Release's associate ministry Voice of the Martyrs USA, leading their ministry in Africa.

In December 2015 he undertook a short visit to Khartoum, capital of Sudan, then under the repressive rule of President al-Bashir. His brutal regime intimidated, arrested, imprisoned, and tortured Christians – as well as demolishing and bombing church buildings.

Just before leaving the country, Petr was stopped at the airport by security officials who confiscated his laptop, phone and camera – and detained him for questioning.

Later, his interrogators showed him photos of each meeting he had arranged during his visit – revealing that he had been under surveillance from the moment he arrived. Petr was charged with espionage, waging war against the state and undermining the constitution. After a six-month trial, he was sentenced to life in prison.

This fast-moving and compelling book describes his 445 days of imprisonment. For some of this time he was kept in a dirty, crowded cell with ISIS militants who regularly humiliated and beat him.

'Each time I was slapped, punched, kicked, or ridiculed, I thought of Christ and what He patiently endured at the hands of the Roman soldiers.'

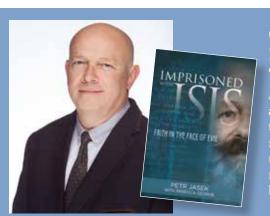
At other times Petr was able to share the gospel with fellow prisoners – on one occasion seeing 12 Eritrean men accept Christ as their Saviour.

Throughout the book, Petr tells how God had been graciously preparing him for this ordeal. In May 2013, for example, nearly three years before his arrest, God gave Petr a powerful dream of his eventual imprisonment, 'the most vivid and disturbing of my life'.

As a teenager, Petr had devoured Richard Wurmbrand's book *In God's Underground*, which describes his imprisonment and torture in Romania. 'It would become the second-most important book in my life after the Bible,' he writes.

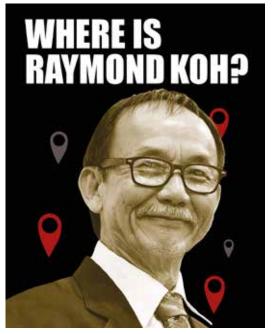
Although we may never walk in Petr's shoes, we can all be encouraged by his experience of God's faithfulness. Petr trusted God, even in the darkest moments – a God who knows what it is to walk the way of suffering.

While at times a harrowing read, I was inspired to see how God gave Petr courage thoughout – before opening the prison doors to set him free.



ORDER YOUR HARDBACK COPY TODAY

Imprisoned with ISIS is available from Release at the discounted price of £15 including P&P. Order using the attached form, at release international.org or by calling: 01689 823491.



Thank you to everyone who has been collecting signatures for our petition calling on the Malaysian government to release all information related to the forced disappearance of Pastor Raymond Koh.

Raymond was abducted in a military-style operation in February 2017– and has not been seen since. You can see video footage of his abduction at releaseinternational.org/releaseraymond.

'There has been no word as to whether Pastor Koh is dead or alive. Malaysia must secure his release and account for his disappearance, which by any standard is a crime,' said Release CEO Paul Robinson.

Raymond's wife Susanna, who supports the petition, told Release how she has been coping in recent weeks.

'The Psalms have been comforting me during this period of uncertainty,' she said. 'Psalm 23 and Psalm 91 are my favourites. God is our good shepherd. He is our shelter, protector, strength and living hope.'

Commenting on the restrictions brought about by Covid-19, she said: 'To me this time is like a silent retreat at home. God is with us. He will never leave us or forsake us.'

SIGN THE PETITION ONLINE

Sign the petition at releaseinternational.org/ releaseraymond – and ask your friends and church to sign too.



Speaking tour by key Nigerian partner

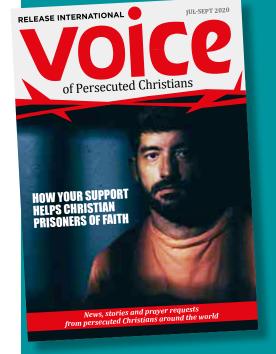
Hassan John, one of Release's partners in Nigeria, is due to visit the UK for a speaking tour in November.

Hassan, who works alongside the Archbishop of Jos, Ben Kwashi, has been supporting pastors in the north east of the country, where many believers continue to suffer attacks by terrorists.

His vision is to train and equip these pastors, strengthening their faith, and encouraging them to reach out to their communities with the saving power of the gospel.

Details will be given in the next edition of *Voice* magazine and at releaseinternational.org/events.

Share Voice magazine in your church



You can encourage prayer and support for our persecuted Christian family by distributing *Voice* magazine in your church. Find out more from your local Release contact:

Ireland: Stephen on 028 9334 0014

London: Imtiaz on 07395 425507

Midlands & North: Kenneth on 07375 516408

Scotland: James on 07434 894016

South: Kenneth on 07375 516408

Wales & W Midlands: Paul on 07747 535588

Or call 01689 823491



Release associate and Christian aid worker Petr Jasek, who spent 14 months in prison for his faith, reflects on the surprising message of the New Testament.

REJOICE IN PERSECUTION!

'But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed' (1Peter 4:13, ESV).

The New Testament teaches that we should rejoice when sharing in sufferings. Look at the apostles who were beaten by the Jewish authorities: 'Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name (Acts 5:41). The apostles considered it an honour to be beaten for their Lord.

In Philippians 1:29, the apostle Paul considers the suffering of Christians a 'granted privilege'. I believe that suffering, especially that crowned with a martyr's death, is one of the outstanding honours and an important privilege for Christians. This 'graduation ceremony' includes a lot of spectators. But they don't only include the demanding spectators of the Roman arenas.

Christian martyrs are a testimony of faith and obedience not only to our visible world, but especially to the spiritual one. 'For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men' (1 Corinthians 4:9). Yes, like a theatre! Christians today, like the apostles, should be ready to play their part on life's stage – whatever the cost.

I know that the Lord is proud of His servants – He even prides Himself on them. 'Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns

evil?' says the Lord to Satan (Job 1:8). The Lord prides Himself on His servant because He knows Job will remain faithful – even in the most difficult of trials.

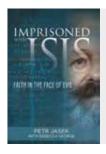
A Christian martyr is a 'live' actor on the stage of ages over which the Lord Himself is the director, and the spectators include in the first row of seats Satan with his servants. God demonstrates to the visible world – as well as to the spiritual – the faithfulness of His servants, which Lucifer rejected when he lifted himself up in pride.

The Lord does not choose everyone to play that part. Nonetheless, as we are members of one body, it is fully natural to be concerned where and how a part of our body – our Christian family – suffers.

'Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body' (Hebrew 13:3).



By refusing to be unconcerned or indifferent toward our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters – wherever they live around the world – we make it clear that we are fundamentally affected by their sufferings, that we are members of the same body, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the head.



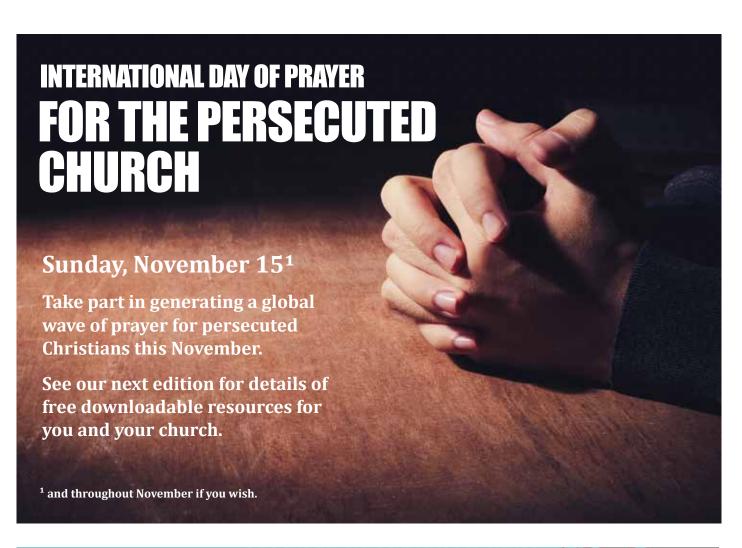
See page 20 for details of Petr's new book, *Imprisoned with ISIS.*

INSPIRING FAITH

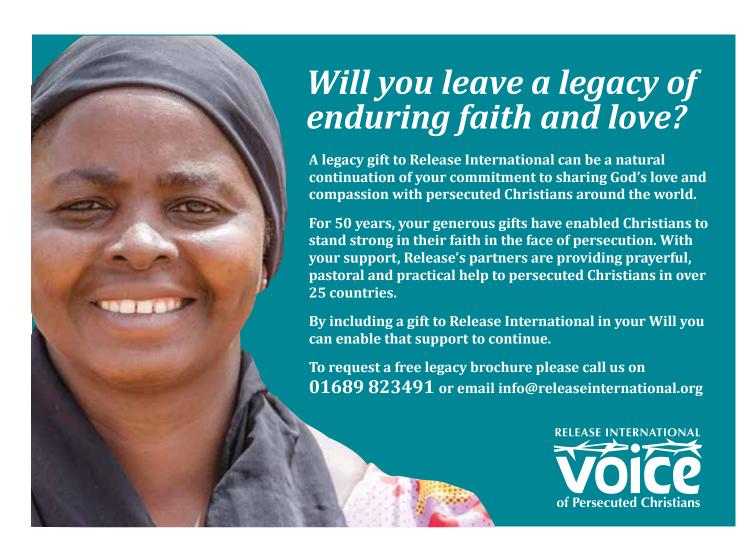


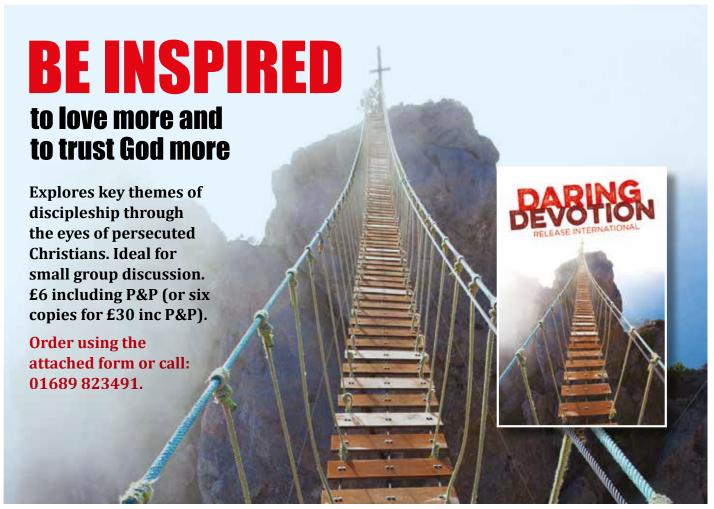
"The essence of the Christian religion is not winning, but daring. Jesus is the way, not only the prize."

Pastor Richard Wurmbrand was imprisoned for 14 years in communist Romania in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968 he inspired the founding of Release, which today continues his ministry to serve persecuted Christians around the world in the name of Jesus.





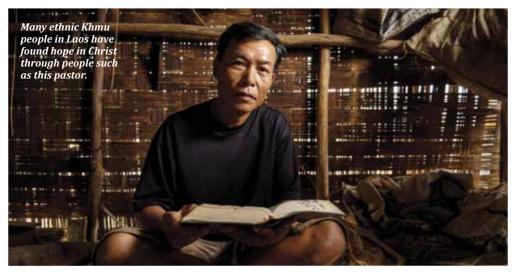




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July-September 2020



JULY 2020

Heavenly Father,

You bring light to the darkness and 'the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1:5). You have won the victory over sin and death: hallelujah!

I lift to You my persecuted family across the world, Lord. Please equip and strengthen them so that their light will shine and others will glorify You (Matthew 5:16).

Give them the grace, Lord, to respond to their enemies with love, and the courage to speak of hope and peace when others give voice to fear and hatred. May they be a city on a hill, Lord.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

LAOS

WEDNESDAY 1: Thank God for the faithful evangelistic work of people such as the pastor pictured, who have reached many ethnic Khmu people and led them to Christ.

THURSDAY 2: Many ethnic minority Prai in Laos have become Christians. Praise God that, despite severe persecution, most are reportedly prepared to stand firm in their faith.

FRIDAY 3: Officials in northern Laos interrupted a worship service in a tribal Prai village recently and warned the Christians that they would be arrested if they did not stop meeting – because 'too many people are becoming Christians'. Praise God for church growth!

SATURDAY 4: Pray for Pastor Bountheung and his family: police have ordered them to renounce their faith and pay compensation to relatives of a man who attacked Bountheung's daughter and died in the ensuing struggle.

SUNDAY 5: Pray that the work of Bountheung (above) and other faithful pastors in Laos results in a rich harvest even though the workers are few (Matthew 9:37).

MONDAY 6: Pastor Sithong was arrested in Savannakhet Province after resisting efforts

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL



by locals and police to shut down his new church. He remains in detention. Pray for his protection and swift release.

TUESDAY 7: Pray that the Holy Spirit will move through the communist nation of Laos and cause many to search for deeper meaning in their lives.

ERITREA

WEDNESDAY 8: Pray that Christians in Eritrea will stand firm amid persecution and that they will continue to be a witness for Christ, in their homeland and beyond.

THURSDAY 9: When Christian parents are jailed in Eritrea, church members care for their children. Pray that God will protect families who are separated and that they will soon be reunited.

FRIDAY 10: Give thanks that Pastor 'Paul', ministering in Eritrea, says that people are open to receive the gospel and many are coming to Christ, even in prison. They are taught first about salvation, then persecution.

SATURDAY 11: A former prisoner from Eritrea, who was made to cut down trees and fill trucks with wood during his time in jail, said that the Christians were faithful, even in their forced work. Praise God for their strong witness to their fellow prisoners.

SUNDAY 12: Ask God to heal the trauma of the many Eritrean Christians who have been arrested because of their

faith. They are often beaten and tortured; some have been imprisoned several times.

MONDAY 13: Pray for about 40 Eritrean Christians who received discipleship training in Ethiopia earlier this year through Release partners: to strengthen their faith, equip them for ministry and help them deal with trauma.

TUESDAY 14: An Eritrean pastor who attended training run by Release partners (above) said afterwards: 'We are filled with hope and faith!' Pray that Eritrean believers who have fled their homeland will know the truth of Romans 8:28, that 'in all things God works for the good of those who love him'.

WEDNESDAY 15: Pray for 'Aki', an Eritrean Christian widow who attended the training (above), that she will keep looking to the Lord and be reminded that the church is the bride of Christ.

THURSDAY 16: Give thanks that Richard Wurmbrand's books helped prepare a young Eritrean Christian, Tesfit, for the persecution he was later to face. Pray that many others facing persecution in Eritrea will be moved by the testimony of the man who inspired the founding of Release.

FRIDAY 17: Praise God for the many Eritrean Christians who testify as to how God saved them from arrest. Pastor Tesfahans gives thanks that his wife's sudden illness meant he was away from home when police came to arrest him.

SATURDAY 18: Ask God to heal Pastor 'Titus'. Severe beatings in prison have damaged his back. Give thanks that he loves to worship and ministers to others through song.

SUNDAY 19: Praise God for the faith of the ten-year-old daughter of Tsedal, a widow living in north Ethiopia whose husband died in prison last year. The child had written to her father: 'We have a defeated enemy – Satan has already lost the war!'

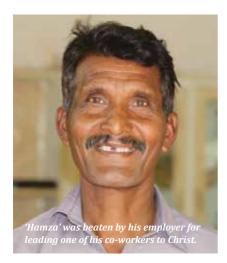
MONDAY 20: Pray for Release's partners in Ethiopia and for their work with Eritrean refugees. Praise God that their church community is growing so much that they are expanding their premises.

PAKISTAN

TUESDAY 21: In Punjab, the Government has deployed only Christian workers to clean, serve food and administer medicines in hospital wards and quarantine facilities dealing with Covid-19, alongside more senior medical staff. Pray that these key workers will receive recognition rather than discrimination.

WEDNESDAY 22: Pray for 'Hamza' (pictured), who was beaten up by the owner of the brick kiln where he is a bonded labourer because he led a co-worker to Christ.

THURSDAY 23: Pray for justice for Christians who are routinely treated as secondclass citizens in Pakistan: only non-Muslims are hired as



street sweepers and rubbish collectors. At least 70 such workers reportedly died in Lahore alone last year, mostly in road accidents.

FRIDAY 24: Pray for the family of Ashiq Masih, a Christian street sweeper who was killed recently when a police car struck him in Gujranwala, Punjab. His family were given the equivalent of £500 in compensation.

SATURDAY 25: Pray for wisdom and protection for members of Trinity Pentecostal Church in Kala Shah Kaku which was recently vandalised due to a land dispute. Pastor Samuel Hadayat says the former owners of a plot the church bought last year are now pressurising him to sell it back.

NIGERIA

SUNDAY 26: Pray that the Nigerian Government will take firm action against Fulani militants, who killed 620

Christians in the first five months of 2020, according to civil rights campaigners.

MONDAY 27: Please pray for Christians in Gonan Rogo village, Kaduna, where Fulani militants killed 17 people in May. A couple and their three children were among the dead. Pray for a three-month-old baby who survived a bullet wound: the same bullet killed her mother.

TUESDAY 28: Pray for Christians in Kaduna state living amid growing lawlessness. Church leaders have called on state authorities to do more to stem the tide of violence.

WEDNESDAY 29: Pray for people in the predominantly Christian village of Ungwan Anjo in Kaduna state, where nearly all the houses were burnt down during a Fulani militant attack in May. Two Christians were killed, two were kidnapped and the rest were forced to flee.

THURSDAY 30: Pray for the 15,000 Christians displaced from the Kajuru county area of Kaduna after a series of raids in mid-May during which 27 Christians were killed in 48 hours.

FRIDAY 31: Please pray for six-year-old Joanna who was abducted by militants who murdered her father, a Christian lecturer at Jos University. She was later rescued by police.

AUGUST 2020

SUDAN

SATURDAY 1: Thank God that hopes of greater religious freedom in Sudan are rising. State-appointed committees imposed on churches under former president Omar al-Bashir have been abolished: they confiscated many church properties.

SUNDAY 2: A truck belonging to a Baptist church which was seized in 2012 has recently been released by the transitional Government. Pray that all other confiscated property will now be returned.

MONDAY 3: Pray for Sudan's Government as it prepares to make the transition from military rule to civilian governance in 2022. Pray that it will champion religious freedom for all citizens.

TUESDAY 4: A government official recently told the media that the death penalty for apostasy is to be removed. Pray this promise will become a reality.

WEDNESDAY 5: Praise God that years of conflict in the Darfur region, western Sudan, have caused people to be open to the gospel, and the church in Darfur is reportedly growing.

THURSDAY 6: Pray for 'Ameen' and 'Nasif', Darfuri Christians who are both committed to spreading the gospel among Darfuris. Pray that many will find hope in Christ in the region and beyond.

FRIDAY 7: Pray for courage for those delivering Bibles

prayershield

to troubled areas such as the Nuba Mountains. The current blockade on humanitarian relief there makes this dangerous work.

SATURDAY 8: Pray for Ahmed, an ethnic Misseriya Arab who became a Christian in Abyei. Local people twice tried to set his house on fire last year and he has been in hiding ever since.

CHINA

SUNDAY 9: Pray for God's people in China where officials took advantage of the Covid-19 outbreak to step up their persecution of churches. Ask God to renew in His people a steadfast faith which will draw many others to Christ.

MONDAY 10: During the Covid-19 crisis, authorities have banned all online services and accelerated their programme to remove crosses and demolish church buildings in some areas. Pray for members of Donghu Church in Qinghai province, which was demolished at Easter.

TUESDAY 11: Ask God to bless members of a house church in Hunan province whose meeting place, a private home, was demolished at Easter.

WEDNESDAY 12: Continue to pray for the heavily persecuted Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan: some members were arrested at home at Easter as they



'Manuel' and 'Sandra' minister under the watchful eye of paramilitary groups in Colombia.

watched online church activities.

THURSDAY 13: Thank God that Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church (previous prayer) is said to be in good spirits, despite having been in prison since 2018. His wife, Jiang Rong, remains under tight surveillance.

FRIDAY 14: Pray that the coronavirus crisis will prompt many more people in China to find out about Jesus and to 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' (Matthew 5:6).

SATURDAY 15: Continue to pray for Beijing lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who has been detained since 2009 and has not been seen since 2017; he has suffered appalling torture.

SUNDAY 16: The online sale of Bibles has been banned in China for two years now. Pray that God's word will spread to even the most remote areas of this yast nation.

COLOMBIA

MONDAY 17: Please pray for courage and protection for those ministering to communities in 'red zones', areas controlled by paramilitaries and guerrilla groups. They need permission for worship and travel.

TUESDAY 18: Pray for pastors 'Manuel' and 'Sandra' (pictured), a couple who have been ministering for 12 years in a part of Colombia where paramilitaries are active. All their church activities are under tight surveillance.

WEDNESDAY 19: Pastors are frequently targeted by militant groups because of their position of authority within the community. Pray that many militants will lay down their arms and turn to Christ.

THURSDAY 20: Pray for people with a calling to bring the gospel to indigenous

prayershield

communities in Colombia.
Attempts to win greater
autonomy for indigenous
communities have led to calls
to ban church-run schools in
such areas.

FRIDAY 21: The 'Martinez' family minister in Chocó, sharing the gospel, distributing Bibles and planting churches, amid fierce persecution. They have moved many times. Ask God to protect the family and bless their church.

SATURDAY 22: Lack of transport, inhospitable terrain and insecurity make it hard for Christians in Colombia's 'red zones' to obtain Bibles. Pray for protection for those who put their lives at risk to distribute scriptures in these areas.

SUNDAY 23: Pray for 'Sara', a former member of Colombian guerrilla group, the FARC. Now she spreads the gospel in FARC-held areas, despite receiving threats from the group.

AZERBAIJAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

MONDAY 24: Praise God that the Baptist community in Aliabad, Azerbaijan, has finally been officially allowed to meet – more than 25 years after it first applied for permission. Pastor Hamid Shabanov, who has been arrested and fined many times for hosting meetings, says his church can now meet for two hours on a Sunday.

TUESDAY 25: Pray that the Azeri Government will now grant the Baptist community legal status so congregations across the nation can meet.

WEDNESDAY 26: Pray for a Baptist pastor in a Central Asian state who was fined nearly two months' average wages for leading worship without state permission.

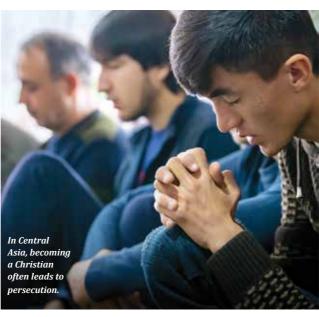
THURSDAY 27: Thank God that Tajik pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov, who was serving a three-year jail term for 'singing extremist songs' and inciting 'religious hatred', was released three months early.

FRIDAY 28: The Sunmin Sunbogym (Full Gospel) Protestant Church in the northern city of Konibodom in Tajikistan has been closed since March 2017. Pray that it will reopen soon.

SATURDAY 29: In one Central Asian state, two Christians were heavily fined for hosting church meetings in their homes. In one raid, officials threatened to take away the host's grandchildren and to make sure that participants lost their jobs.

SUNDAY 30: Pray for Release partners Barbara and Hugh in Central Asia (featured in our May 2020 podcast) who are using literature and radio to spread the gospel. Pray that their audience will grow and many will come to Christ.

MONDAY 31: Pray for believers in Central Asia whose families have rejected them because they have become Christians. Leaving Islam is considered to bring shame on the family.



SEPTEMBER 2020

IRAN

TUESDAY 1: Pray for Pastor Victor Bet Tamraz, his wife Shamiram Issavi Khabizeh and three other Christians – Amin, Kavian and Hadi – whose appeals against long jail sentences have repeatedly been postponed.

WEDNESDAY 2: Praise God that Ebrahim Firouzi has reportedly been treated kindly by locals during his time in exile, even in an area renowned for Islamist extremist activity. Pray that God will continue to bless and protect Ebrahim.

THURSDAY 3: Mary (Fatemeh) Mohammadi received a suspended sentence of three months in prison and ten lashes after being arrested during protests in Tehran in January. Ask God to heal Mary of the physical and emotional abuse she suffered in jail.

FRIDAY 4: Praise God that Amin Khaki has been released eight months into a 14-month sentence. Amin was convicted last March of 'propaganda against the state and establishing house churches'.

SATURDAY 5: Thank God for the early release in March of Fatemeh Bakhteri and Rokhsareh Ghanbari who had served seven months of a one-year sentence for 'spreading propaganda against the regime'.

SUNDAY 6: Pray for protection for Christians held in Tehran's Evin Prison where there have been several cases of Covid-19.

MONDAY 7: Pray for Ismaeili Maghrebinejad who is still appealing against multiple prison sentences, including one for responding to a joke on social media deemed critical of Islamic clergy.

TUESDAY 8: Pray for four Christians from Rasht who were imprisoned for being part of a house church because they could not afford bail: Ramin Hassanpour, his wife Kathrin Sajadpour, Moslem Rahimi and another unnamed believer. Ramin and Kathrin have two teenage sons.

WEDNESDAY 9: Pray that the Iranian authorities will stop viewing membership of a house church as a crime – and begin to see Christians as good citizens who love their nation.

NORTH KOREA

THURSDAY 10: Pray for Deacon Jang (pictured) who was abducted in China by North Korean agents in 2014, for his ministry among North Koreans.

FRIDAY 11: Jang (above) worked closely with Chinese-Korean pastor Han Chung-Ryeol who was murdered by North Korean agents in 2016, because of his gospel work among North Koreans. Pray their



ministry's legacy will be many lives changed.

SATURDAY 12: Praise God that Release associate ministry VOM Korea has reported new opportunities for ministry inside North Korea during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lockdown has meant people who normally work long hours in factories have had time to listen to Christian radio broadcasts at home.

SUNDAY 13: Thank God for a 'strong interest' in Christianity inside North Korea currently. Release partners have seen a doubling in the distribution of ministry materials in the first quarter of 2020.

MONDAY 14: Pray for every North Korean who has received a 'ministry pack' through VOM Korea recently, including everything from personal protective equipment to audio Bibles.



TUESDAY 15: Continue to pray for North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Ask God to set people of integrity among his closest advisers, people who will promote godly values and uphold human rights.

INDIA

WEDNESDAY 16: Pray that the Government of India will take concerted action to curb religious intolerance and to uphold religious liberty through its policy and programmes.

THURSDAY 17: Pray for the church in India, especially in eastern Uttar Pradesh where anti-Christian sentiment runs

They told me to call upon my God to come and rescue me.'

Pastor Lalu, attacked by neighbours for refusing to deny Christ high. Pray that Christians will remain steadfast.

FRIDAY 18: Pray for Pastor Indresh, Kumar Gautam and four other members of a church in Pratapgarh, Uttar Pradesh, who were beaten in police custody after accusations of 'forced conversion'. Four of them were forced to pose 'like Christ on the cross' as they were beaten.

SATURDAY 19: One of the police officers who allegedly tortured Pastor Indresh and his friends (above) said: 'Let's see if your Jesus would come here to save you.' Pray that this man will come to know Christ.

SUNDAY 20: Pray for 16 families from a church in Palamu district, Jharkhand state, who received death threats from mobs every night for nearly three weeks, to try to force them to return to their traditional animistic religion. Two families signed documents to 'prove' their reconversion.

MONDAY 21: Please pray that the new Chief Minister of Jharkhand, Hemant Soren, will follow through on his condemnation of the persecution of Christians and take firm steps to stamp it out.

TUESDAY 22: Tribal animists in central India demolished the home of Pastor Lalu Kirade, assaulted him and evicted him and his family from their village in Khandwa district, Madhya Pradesh. Two

months later, they were still living outdoors, a few miles away.

WEDNESDAY 23: Pastor Isaac Paulose from Sehore, Madhya Pradesh, was left with serious injuries after ten assailants beat him with chains and rods, then ran over him with motorbikes. Pray for his protection: they threatened to kill him if he continues his ministry.

THURSDAY 24: Extremists recently shot Neelam, daughter of the late Pastor Chamu Hassa Purty from Sandih village, Jharkhand, because his family had 'not learnt the lesson' after his murder almost five years ago. Pray for Neelam: she was shot in the hand and leg, but survived.

FRIDAY 25: Pray for 'Aarav', who came to Christ through the witness of a pastor. Aarav and his family were recently evicted from their village amid accusations of 'forced conversion'.

VIETNAM

SATURDAY 26: Pray that the word of God will reach even the most remote parts of Vietnam, areas where particularly ethnic minority Christians face intense persecution.

SUNDAY 27: Pray for believers in Vietnamese villages who find themselves in a tiny minority and who are often harassed, ostracised or even attacked because of their faith.



Christian workers in Vietnam distribute God's word in remote mountain regions.

MONDAY 28: Ask God to protect 'Bao' and 'Chi' who have spent 20 years sharing the gospel among tribal groups in the central region of Vietnam, despite repeated arrest and harassment.

TUESDAY 29: Pray for those who work under the radar in

Vietnam to distribute Bibles. Pray they will find ever-more creative ways to spread God's word in restricted areas.

WEDNESDAY 30: Pray that every family who receives a Bible through Christian workers such as those pictured will be touched by the love of God.

Sources: BBC; China Aid; Forum 18; Middle East Concern; Morning Star News; Release partners and contacts; VOM Canada; VOM USA.

Names in inverted commas have been changed to protect identities.

While we do not provide financial support to every Christian mentioned in *Prayer Shield*, we believe in the power of prayer to change lives.

Lord Jesus,

In the tumult and chaos, You are a haven of peace. Thank you.

Jesus, please remind my precious persecuted brothers and sisters that You are their hiding place, that You are all they need. You know the end from the beginning, even and especially when they cannot see the way ahead. 'Your purpose will stand' (Isaiah 46:10).

In the midst of the storm, Lord, guide and comfort them; may they hear Your voice.

Amen

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