

Why Do You Persecute Me



# Why Do You Persecute Me

*True stories from the Persecuted Church*

Jan Vermeer

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# *Dedicated To:*

My wife and children, who always stand by me,

and

the members of our Bible study group,  
who are so faithful in their prayers,

and

Allina, Lee Joo-Chan, Hyo, Hae-Woo, Haik, Mehdi, Achmed,  
Noviana and Aaina, who have taught me so much,

and

Father, Son and Spirit, to whom all praise and honor are due.

Sometimes in life, you just have to pray and persevere.

— American war veteran

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.

— Jim Elliot

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

— Jesus Christ

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He fell to the ground and heard  
a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul,  
why do you persecute Me?"

— Luke (Acts 9:4)



# FOREWORD

I am writing this foreword in Jos, the capital of Plateau State in Nigeria. I have been assured by a number of Christian inhabitants that Jos stands for “Jesus our Savior”. It feels strange to be here. The people living in this town are not all peace-loving. Indeed, there are some who would like to see me dead because I come from the West, because I want to encourage the local Christians, and because I belong to Christ.

I arrived in Jos by taxi a few hours ago. The airplane that was to bring me from Lagos in the south to Jos in the north had already left when I arrived at the airport. “We sent the booking agent a message saying the time had been changed,” said the man at the check-in desk. Be that as it may, the message never reached me. So I took the flight to Abuja. From there it takes four hours to get to Jos by taxi. In Jos, I was warmly welcomed by Nigerian Open Doors staff. They mentioned, almost in passing, “This morning there was an attack on a church. Several people killed, many injured.”

A sinking feeling crept over me. The persecution of Christians is no longer far away. Violence feels different when it does not come to you by e-mail, but from the people themselves.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Two men in a car. They drove straight at the church. One man jumped out at the last moment. The other rammed into the church and set off a bomb. By some good fortune, only four people were killed, including the suicide bomber.”

“How was that?”

“The bomb was in the back of the car. You can see in the photos

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that only the engine is lying in the church. The rest of the car exploded backwards and not into the church.”

I recalled Jesus’ words that I had read on the plane. In Luke 21, He predicts to His disciples the end of the present world. Before this happens, they will persecute you, He warns. His followers would be brought before kings and governors on account of His name. They would be betrayed by friends and even family. Some would die. And still Jesus promises, “Not a hair of your heads will be lost.”

Was this not contradictory? And would the surviving relatives of the victims take comfort from this? Would this Bible verse temper the rage of the Christian youths who, after the attack, killed two Muslims and set on fire several shops belonging to Muslims?

Three days ago, I had a luncheon appointment with a church leader from another part of the Muslim world. Following this, I was to take him to the airport. He called me half an hour before we were to meet. I sensed the tension in his voice.

“Jan, I’m sorry. I’m not going to be able to make it for lunch. There’s a crisis. It’s very disturbing. Let’s meet at one o’clock and we can talk on the way to the airport.”

I agreed and hung up. I did not yet know that the sword that is always hanging over the Church in his country had descended on the wife of one of his staff. This sword is called the “Blasphemy Law”. A terrible law that forbids everyone from insulting Islam or the prophet Mohammed. It is enough to accuse someone. Proof is not needed. The police have to take action, and they do.

“She was simply getting on with her work in her village,” said the church leader when he explained the tale a little while later in the car. “I don’t know why she was accused or by whom.” The telephone rang and he spoke to someone from his church. He gave a sigh as he hung up.

“There’s a demonstration going on in the village where she lives.”

“People demonstrating in support of her?”

He shook his head. “Against her. Some of her colleagues. The police probably arrested her to take her into safe custody.”

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I knew why. It is easier to arrest the victim than to keep back the mob.

Another telephone call. This time, a brief conversation. “Ok, ok,” was all he said.

“Her husband isn’t at home. Fortunately the children are being taken care of by people from the church. We’ll take them to another address. They’re terrified. This is what’s always going on. We don’t have the luxury you do. We can’t just sit behind our desks and work normally. Every half an hour we’re disturbed by things like this. Sometimes more often.”

It sounded accusatory, but it was the frustration speaking. “This must hurt you so much,” I said.

“You know, on the one hand we want to work for our country and for the Kingdom. We want to make a difference. But sometimes you wonder what the point is. I have to phone a lawyer.”

He let the phone ring several times, but it went to voicemail. When he had hung up, he said, “It’s quiet on the road today.”

“Yes, this is a good time of day to drive.”

Another call. A lawyer was on his way to the police station. “Can you imagine it? That such a sweet lady is now having to answer all sorts of questions at the police station? We must get her out of there today. She must not spend the night in the cell, because then she will have a record.”

“And what then?”

“That’ll be the end of her life.”

I understood what he meant. If the accusation was official, she would be held until the court pronounced a sentence. That might take years. The prisons are certainly no fun. Even if she were acquitted, for the rest of her life she would be branded as a blasphemer. She would have to go into hiding or flee the country. Yes, she had to be released today.

“I hope you know how you must pray for us, Jan,” he said. “I know what to pray, but I don’t know how.”

A silence fell in the car. Every now and then, I saw the church

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leader nod off, and I prayed myself with the few words I could find.

Just before we arrived at Amsterdam airport, we prayed together again (me with my eyes open). He asked for wisdom for all those involved and mentioned them by name. He pronounced the words, but they were lacking in strength. I wondered whether my prayers had conviction, but we knew—no, believed—that God was in control.

Now I am writing this foreword in Jos and thinking back on the past week. I realize that in my years at Open Doors, I have not only been an encouragement to the Persecuted Church. I have encountered much pain and sorrow. It is this pain and sorrow that you will find in this book. You will have many questions and will not always be given a satisfactory answer. But hopefully you will also discover that where Jesus is, there is hope. The woman I just wrote about was released the same evening and reunited with her family. At the same time, Asia Bibi is still being held in a Pakistani death cell on the grounds of the same law. Two high-ranking men who wanted to protect her have been killed. Their murderers are honored as heroes. But who knows what is happening to Asia's heart behind bars? Now everything has been taken from her, she has just one thing to hold onto: the hand of Jesus. And she testifies to His love, as many persecuted Christians do.

But why is one Christian saved from a certain situation and another is killed or kept in prison? I have no answer to this. We do not know how our lives will end, but we can know that God is always close by. He is sovereign, He is almighty and omniscient. He is loving in every situation.

Take Aaina, a woman whom you will encounter later in this book. While she was living in a foreign country, lacking sufficient money, having not seen her husband for years, physical and mental complaints playing tricks on her, and being uncertain whether she was finally safe from the long arm of her well-to-do family, I asked her, "How do you keep going?" She answered quietly but self-assuredly, "I experience joy deep down inside."

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But no hair of her head will be lost. Jesus gave us the prospect of eternal life, and nothing that happens to us can change this. Jesus Himself had to suffer to make this possible, but He persevered because of the joy that was in store for Him.

I pray that the stories in this book will help you to discover this joy, so that your faith is strengthened.

A final word of introduction. Although I sometimes feature in the stories, this book is not about me. In essence, this book is not even about the persecuted Christians who play the main roles. The words that Jesus said to Saul on the road to Damascus still resound today, “Why are you persecuting Me?”

Persecution is something deeply personal for your Redeemer. Primarily it is He who is persecuted. He is the Victor, even though it does not look like this. In the testimonies in this book, the hand of God can constantly be discerned. It revolves around Him. This is why each chapter ends with biblical lessons from the lives of the persons described. We see the Bible at work and are challenged to take action ourselves.

I hope that in this book, you will have an encounter with the Persecuted Church. This may lead to a confrontation with your faith. You do not have to agree with how Christians from the Persecuted Church view their experiences. The stories are mainly here to make us think. Do we really believe and how far do we dare to go for our belief?

***For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me.***

***Paul (Galatians 2:19-20)***



# ALLINA

## CHECHNYA

### *To Die is Gain*

The light of the headlamps shines into the school. Under the open windows, some six feet tall, wreaths are propped up against the wall as if they were guarding this monument.

I go in and run my fingers across the bullet holes as my gaze shifts to the photos of the teachers who died. In the middle of this dark hall, a fluffy, pink teddy bear sits on a chair. The bear is clasping a wilted rose between his paws. Who knows, perhaps he is waiting—in vain—for his owner to come home.

My Chechen guide, Vashka, points to marks on the wall and on the ceiling. This is where the children and adults were made to stand. Here the explosives were hidden. This is where things went wrong. It is hard to imagine that, in this place, at least 334 people lost their lives, including 186 children.

In silence, we leave the school with the insignificant name “School number 1”, get in the car and drive to the monument in the centre of Beslan. Like a dolphin jumping out of the sea, the stat-

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ue commemorating the hostage tragedy rises up: copper mothers with bowed heads and outstretched arms who lift their children up to heaven. The statue is surrounded by gravestones, big and small. Some hold photos of the ones they commemorate. The dates of birth vary, but the date of death is the same for all: September 4th, 2004.

I take some photos, because it is my job to record what I see, so that I can tell others. But how can I ever tell anyone what happened here? A hostage-taking by Chechen rebels that lasted for three days and ended in a bloody shoot-out. This “incident” is no more than a paragraph in the history books, but hundreds of people lost their lives, and for thousands of others, the days will never again hold as much color as before.

In the eyes of the Chechen rebels (and the foreign Muslim fighters), this act was no more than an attempt to bring the violence that has ravaged their country for centuries to Russian soil. It shows how difficult it is to break through a cycle of revenge.

Chechnya is in the Caucasus, an area to the north of Turkey, and is subject to Russia. The war of independence, lasting for years, has not led to the desired result. Russia has installed a dictatorship that supports it. The rebels are being armed and influenced by Muslim extremists from other countries. And so the Islamic population is caught between two fires, or rather, between two evils that they cannot choose between. Around the turn of the century, two civil wars seriously impaired the country. Everyone lives in fear of the elite troops of the president, of the Russian soldiers who are still there, and of the rebels who take revenge on anyone who is “in league with” the enemy.

In the middle of all this, there are secret followers of Jesus living in Chechnya. There are not many more than a hundred of them. The average church fellowship in the West is larger. They live among the two million Muslims who consider their nationality and their faith to be indivisible. Any true Chechen is a Muslim. Abandoning your faith brings great shame on your family. A Muslim who becomes a Christian is signing his own death warrant.

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A few hours ago, I was talking to one of these Christians in secret, in the back of a car. It was a conversation that had been planned by God well in advance.

### God's Planning

Months before my trip to Chechnya, I was talking to the Open Doors coordinator for the region. She asked which country in her region I wanted to visit. Chechnya. There was something about the country. I simply felt drawn to it.

Why? Inconsistently enough, it was a country that I had once told myself I would never go to because of the abduction of Westerners. Had the Dutchman Arjan Erkel from the Red Cross not been taken hostage by Chechen rebels and held for years in Dagestan?

I had too much to lose. Would my wife be able to live with the knowledge that her husband was imprisoned? And how would my one-year-old daughter grow up without a father? To go to Chechnya was ... madness.

Still, I was being compelled by something I could not express in words. I just had to go to Chechnya, and if there was an opportunity, I would go. Only when I was in Grozny did I know why I had to be there. The timing was perfect to the day and the hour.

### Grozny

My airplane lands at an airfield a few hours drive from Chechnya. If I had flown direct to Grozny, I would have had to answer a lot of difficult questions. Instead, I have flown to a neighboring country and from there traveled on with a local contact, the Chechen Vashka.

He quickly makes it clear to me how things are done in this region. At the beginning of the journey, I am allowed to get out once

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to go to the restroom. For the remainder of the journey to Grozny, I have to stay sitting in the back. With my blond hair, I do not look Russian enough.

“There are two dangers,” explains Vashka. “The first is that the police will see you and start asking questions. Before you know it, you will have lost all your money, and besides that, your mission will immediately have failed. The second is more serious. That is, if the wrong people see us and we’re kidnapped.”

I nod and put my bottle of water away. It is better not to drink too much in order to avoid being caught.

Praying is a good idea. For the first time in my life, I am able to put a price on my head. Here I am worth a million dollars, or nothing at all. Strange, actually, how the value of your life can depend on the nationality in your passport.

The Russian car with tinted glass in the back drives steadily through the hills in the direction of the heavily guarded border. The gray sky sometimes deposits little drops of rain on the windshield. We pass various police checkpoints. Only once does anyone ask for my passport.

Vashka tells his tale of the wars. It is the tale of a man who is no match for the dark world around him. Houses that are shot to rubble. The fear of merciless Russian soldiers and equally merciless Chechen rebels. The loss of family and friends. There were happy moments, too, he says. His eyes glisten when he tells how he taught his one-year-old son to walk in the bomb shelter, while bombs were dropping nearby. Every minute brings us closer to the moment when it becomes really tense. At Open Doors, the staff that regularly travels has their own tales about border crossings. This will be my tale.

Vashka has crossed the border dozens of times. Still, the closer we get to the border the quieter he becomes. Half an hour before we reach the Chechen border, Vashka takes a couple of pills out of a plastic container. He puts them in his mouth and swallows them without any water. “Sedatives,” he explains. Even now after the of-

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ficial end of the war, the confrontation with Russian soldiers is still heated.

A national border is no longer a line on a map. In reality, crossing the line around Chechnya is not easy. Threatening clouds hang over Chechnya as we approach the border. As if even the weather wants to make it clear to me where we are going. Am I sure? Is there still a way out? I recall the previous night. For the first time in years I had a nightmare. I was under artillery fire in Chechnya and woke up with a shock, sweating.

Concrete speed bumps—that make it impossible to drive up to the border at high speed—were the first sign that we really are nearly there. The second is even more difficult to miss. A big sign that says in various languages:

**“Stop!  
Do not drive on without permission.  
You shall be shot.”**

Vashka turns off the engine. Some Russian soldiers are sitting at their post. One of them gets up and indicates that we should approach. Of course, he wants to see our papers. I pray the few words I can find, “Lord, will You protect us?”

The soldier walks around the car and gives the papers back. We can go. A great burden falls from me.

Vashka accelerates slowly and we drive into Chechnya. A few more hours and we are in Grozny. Vashka speaks little, but he is a good guide. If tourists ever want to go to Chechnya, he will be the man to show them around.

“Do you see those hills?”

“Yes.”

“That’s where the rebels who are hiding from the Russians live.”

Gulp.

We pass a village.

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“The greatest extremists in the country live here. They all keep Kalashnikovs at home. As a Russian loves vodka, so they love weapons.”

Two gulps. I pray that we will not get a flat tire here.

Grozny—the name means “fearsome”. The capital of Chechnya lives up to its name. The outskirts of Grozny are still filled with apartment blocks shot to pieces and other ruins. During the recent wars with Russia, the town was bombarded for months and then taken street by street. Despite the damage, there are still people living in some of the buildings. The inhabitants have no choice. A few years after the last war, the reconstruction is still at an early stage.

The center already seems to have been restored. And how! The spectacular ornamental lighting and imposing facades of the buildings remind me of Paris, France, but a modern version. We turn into a side street and again find ourselves amid the devastated buildings. Here we stop outside a little store. Am I finally allowed to get out? Vashka shakes his head. There is something I can do though. A large tray of eggs is put on my lap. I hope the way to our destination is not too bumpy.

It turns out not to be too bad. With the necessary antics, I manage to keep the eggs whole. We finally drive into an alleyway and stop right in front of the entrance to Vashka’s house. Vashka first opens the door to his courtyard, then the car door, and in two steps I am behind the fence. Safe. “If anyone finds out we have a foreigner in the house, we may have some serious problems,” Vashka says. “With the secret troops of our president or with the rebels.”

After the meal—with plenty of eggs—I am shown to a bed. Tomorrow we will decide what we are going to do next.

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### Allina

Vashka was to be back in three-quarters of an hour, but I have been waiting for almost two hours now. He was going to take some photos of the market for me while I waited here at a safe location. Vashka was also going to establish contact with a local Christian woman, the only Chechen Christian who is willing (or dares) to meet me.

Suddenly, my eye catches Vashka's car driving into the street. He gets out and shakes his head. Not a good sign. He lights a cigarette.

"The president is in the place where Allina lives," he says. "It's a good thing we didn't go there. We would certainly have been found out."

I know there was little chance of me having a meeting with a Christian in Chechnya. Still the news puts a damper on things.

"You can interview her now in the car," Vashka suddenly says. "Half-an-hour maximum."

I must look astonished. I had not been expecting this anymore. I do not say anything but walk straight over to the car. I want to make use of every minute. Vashka goes along to translate. I get in the car and introduce myself.

Allina's face looks pale and drawn, which makes it difficult to guess her age. Like most women in her country, she is wearing a headscarf. Almost immediately, she starts to cry.

I ask Vashka to pray for her in her own language. He does so and she visibly brightens. Then she opens her mouth and begins to speak.

"I belong to Christ," Allina suddenly starts to recount. Her story is confused. "He protects me and takes care of me. When my husband was murdered during the war, I was left behind with four children. I have just come from the court. They have convicted me..."

"She was to receive benefit because she was widowed during the war," explains Vashka. "She signed for it, but she never got the

money. Now she is being accused of theft.”

Allina: “The judges sentenced me to several years in prison... But I don’t have to go to prison. It’s a suspended sentence. I still have children under the age of fourteen and the judge had mercy on me. Formally I am in prison, but in practice I can go about freely.”

### **“You belong to Christ”**

Then she again switches to another subject. “When I was seventeen and I was on the playground with a lot of children and young people, suddenly an old man came up to me. He said, ‘You belong to Christ. When He comes back you will be there too.’ At the time, I didn’t understand him, but I never forgot it. Whenever I’m sad now, I remember those words. When I pray, I have the sense that someone in white clothing is standing next to me and I have a feeling of peace.”

In the past, she did not have this peace. In a bomb shelter, one of her sons found a copy of the New Testament.

“Mummy, you’ll certainly like this book,” he said. “It’s a book about God.” Allina started to read it and one verse from Revelation really touched her heart. “Here I am! I, Jesus Christ, stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with Me.”

“I only knew Jesus from the Koran,” Allina continued. “I always felt drawn to Him. After I had read the Bible, I often looked up into the sky and I knew that there was someone who loved me. Actually, of course, I already knew this when the man came to me in the schoolyard. And now, when I’m sad, I think back on the times when the Lord Jesus has helped me.”

There is a tragic part to Allina’s story. She is clearly traumatized and falteringly tells me about what happened to her husband. In 2002, when both the Russians and the Chechen rebels were sowing

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death and destruction, he was surrounded by a group of men. No one knows who they were, but evidently they wanted to know if he had become a believer. According to Allina, he had not. They were both still seeking. The men shot him dead.

“I was no longer able to feed my children and I became depressed,” sighs Allina. “So for a time, they were in an orphanage. That meant they weren’t at home on the day when the Russians raided my house. They were looking for weapons. When they saw my Muslim clothing, they said, ‘You’re a Muslim extremist! You’re helping criminals!’ I was afraid that they would shoot me dead and I prayed to Christ for protection. ‘No!’ I said. ‘I’m not a Wahabite. And God loves all people! We must keep His commandments.’ I was afraid, but fortunately, in the end they went away again. After the death of my husband, I had difficulties with my in-laws too. They didn’t like me. They accused me of being a Wahabite and of belonging to the Muslim extremists, who are the enemies of ‘ordinary’ Chechens.”

### **“Fortunately, I now know another Christian”**

Christians abroad helped Allina to some extent to come to terms with the death of her husband. She was again able to take care of her children and got them back again two years ago.

“I get up early every day and then I pray. I ask God to help me so that I can do my best for Him, so that I can reach people with His love.” I ask her how she came to know God. “I had known Jesus all my life, but actually only through Islam,” she recalls. “I always had a tender spot for this figure from the Koran. When I read about His suffering in the New Testament, I came to love Him even more. But I was only converted when I was abroad. I was on my way to collect my children from their holiday camp when I was invited by a Christian to attend a church service. I was so moved by Jesus’ message of love that I wanted to follow Him forever.”

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Then she did something that few Chechen Christians do. She told her family that she had turned away from Islam to follow Christ. “Back in Chechnya, I immediately started to talk about my new faith. In the past, I had lots of friends. Now they’ve all left me. My best friend would always support me. But even she betrayed me. Fortunately, I now know one other Christian.”

Fortunately, I now know one other Christian. Allina really did say this at this point, but it only struck me when I was back in the Netherlands studying my notes. In a country with two million inhabitants, for Allina there was only one person with whom she could really be herself. This friend (I heard later) occasionally came to Allina’s home to study the Bible with her and to pray with her.

### **“We’re going to crucify you”**

Despite being rejected, Allina continues to evangelize. “God leads me to people and He tells me with whom I should talk about Him.”

This does not mean that everyone is willing to accept what she says. On the contrary, sometimes it is perilous. “At my work, I’m in a position of leadership. To start with, everyone was very nice to me, until I started to say that I was a Christian. The staff would no longer do what I said. One day, one of them told me. ‘You’ve become a monk. This afternoon, we’re going to crucify you!’ I tried to smile and said, ‘Because of Christ, I can take that.’ It seemed as if they were becoming more and more aggressive every day. Another time, someone grabbed hold of me and said, ‘I’ll cut down your children before your eyes.’”

Still Allina does not hate her persecutors. “No, I pray for them. Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. The more they insulted and threatened me, the more I loved them. I even said, ‘I love you. In your hearts, you are very kind.’ I pray for my colleagues every day.”

Recently, Allina had to go and see her boss. She knew things

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could not continue like this.

“How are you getting on?” he asked.

“I’m very grateful for what you have done for me, but the staff no longer needs me. I had better resign.”

The man was surprised. “What do you mean? Tell me what you’re trying to say.”

“I’m a bad member of staff. You no longer need me.”

“What’s happened?”

“Nothing. I’m simply not a good manager, and I’ve taught the people how to do the job themselves. You don’t need me anymore.”

“I didn’t want to tell him about what my colleagues had done to me,” Allina says now. “But he went to investigate himself and heard that some people were threatening me. Then he intervened. The people who had been involved were given the choice: stop or be fired. They refused to stop and my boss threw them out. Now I’m no longer troubled at work.”

### **“This is from the Body of Christ”**

“You must round it off,” Vashka suddenly says.

“Do you have any specific prayer requests?” I ask Allina.

“Please pray that I really won’t have to go to prison,” she says. “And pray that I can find a new flat. Someone else has offered more money for my flat and now I have to get out. I’m praying, ‘Lord God, it doesn’t matter to me if I have to sleep in the street, as long as my children have a roof over their heads!’ I don’t have enough money to buy winter clothes for my children either.”

Vashka starts the car and drives to the station in Grozny. I reflect on a strange thought that came to me just before I got in the car in Grozny.

“As a foreigner, you can’t go out in the streets in Grozny,” Vashka has told me. “I’ll get the meals. Leave your money at home.”

But I had been stubborn. I thought that if I were to be seized, it

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might be better to have some money with me.

We arrive at the station. While Allina is preparing to get out of the car, I take out my wallet and give her 5,600 rubles, about 170 dollars. “This is not my money,” I say. “This is from the Body of Christ in my country.”

“I knew that God would send someone to help me,” she says with a quavering voice. She gently squeezes my hand. “I thank Him for you all.”

At that moment, I know why God laid on my heart this desire to go to Chechnya, why I was so determined to take money with me, and why He guided things in such a way that, precisely today, I could have this meeting with Allina. From the beginning, it has been His intention to show Allina and me how great and mighty He is.

Allina gets out and immediately disappears into the crowd. We set off for Beslan. We want to get out of Chechnya before dark. On the way, I again continuously pray for protection.

We reach Beslan without any difficulties and see the school where so many were killed. I will never forget the teddy bear. As we are standing in the cemetery a little while later, among the polished gravestones— many with portraits of the children and parents who were killed—I look at the “Tree of Grief”, the striking monument to the appalling tragedy: the mothers of Beslan lift their children up to heaven. The silence in the place screams of so much brokenness in the world.

And yet . . . people like Allina testify to God’s grace. She was not there in Beslan, but does know what the costs of war are. Just like Allina, in this place I cannot do anything but look up to heaven and remind myself that there is Someone who loves me, my Father who gave Himself to save all those who believe in Him.

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### The Bible in the Life of Allina

Philippians 1:21: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Like most Chechen Christians, Allina has little knowledge of the Bible. She does have a Bible, but it is difficult to study with others or to receive teaching from the Bible in any other way. And still she knows this: that Jesus Christ is worth everything. This is why she joins Paul in saying, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” This conviction is demonstrated in her actions. If it is necessary, she is willing to die for God. Does this require faith? Of course it does. But God gives the faith at the moment that the threat comes. This can be clearly seen in Allina’s life. On the other hand, early in her Christian life Allina decided that what Jesus proclaimed was the truth. And she is willing to die for this truth. Are we willing to do so too?

1 Corinthians 15:22-23: “For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him.” God made it clear to Allina at a young age that she belonged to Him, even though she did not yet understand that He was going to accept Allina as a daughter. In the same way, God accepts us as sons and daughters. In His Word, He tells each of us that we are His children.

Revelation 3:20: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with Me.” The first time that Allina read the New Testament, this verse jumped out at her. This is often how the Holy Spirit works. He ensures that your eye falls on a specific verse and wants you to do something with it. For Allina, and for us too, this verse from Revelation 3 is a call to let Jesus in. He wants to give Himself to us, but we must permit Him to live in us. He will never go against our will. This seems to contradict what we said in point 2, that God first chose us. We have to realize that God is the beginning and the end of everything. We are naturally inclined to turn away from Him, but God brings us back again. You do have

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your own responsibility in this. His hand is outstretched. Will you take it? He is knocking on the door. Will you open it?

### **For Reflection**

How do people see in you that “to live is Christ and to die is gain”? Do you have to live in a context of persecution of Christians for this?

### **What You Can Do**

Have a listen to Psalm 63 by Sons of Korah (easily found on YouTube), or read the Psalm in your Bible. Put yourself in the position of a persecuted Christian and meditate on this Psalm. Even if you cannot literally visit Allina, the knowledge that you are putting yourself in the place of persecuted Christians is an encouragement to them.

*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*

*Paul (Romans 8:18)*

# LEE JOO-CHAN AND HYO

## NORTH KOREA

### *Amazing Grace*

They look so small on the stage: Lee Joo-Chan, his wife Chan-Sook and their son Hyo. We had asked them to sing a song at the Open Doors Day in the Netherlands in 2010. Chan-Sook had immediately said yes; she would sing together with her husband. In North Korea, she had trained as a professional musician.

“What song will you sing?”

Lee Joo-Chan and Chan-Sook did not need any time to think. “Amazing Grace,” he replied. “That’s the song that Christians sing the most in North Korean.”

And now they are on the stage in front of six thousand people who have listened breathlessly to Lee’s account. They sing the first lines in Korean:

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*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

Hyo does not join in. The 22-year-old puts his hands in front of his eyes and drops to his knees. The song and the atmosphere have taken him back to his dark fatherland, to the streets where he stole food, back to the friends who died in his arms, to the cell in which he nearly lost his life.

When Lee notices that his son is weeping, he cannot contain himself either. He falls to his knees and hits the stage with his left fist. He cries out, “God, save the people of North Korea!” It is a cry that comes directly from the Persecuted Church, and cuts to the quick, that we must never forget.

Later a columnist for a Christian broadcasting company writes:

*There on the stage in the flesh stands brother Lee Joo-Chan. He speaks passionately about his country and the indescribable misery in which North Koreans have to live. I become increasingly dismayed as he tells how his son almost starved to death and later was tortured to within a hair's breadth of his life. A child. Who would do something like that to a child? At the end of his address, to everyone's amazement, his wife and son appear on the stage. They're alive. They're here. And they want to sing a song for us: Amazing Grace in their own language. Bravely they start to sing. But it's no good. The boy gives up after a few words. I see how his tough, youthful face crumples in spasms of grief. On the second*

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*line, Lee Joo-Chan falls to his knees. Frozen, with my hand in front of my mouth, I hear his sobs and heartrending prayers. No one is able to grasp what he is saying, but everyone understands. Here is a traumatized man, overwhelmed by emotion, crying out to God for his country. On the screen we see how the director does what we all want to do: he kneels down next to him and puts his arms around him. Two worlds touch. And one of the worlds is hardly able to comprehend anything of the other.*

She is right. The one world can hardly comprehend the other. But thanks to God's grace, which is infinitely great, the two worlds touch. This is why the tale of Lee and Hyo is in this book, because God heard the prayers of father and son, who wanted to tell their tale to a large audience in order to shake the free world awake. I met Lee in September 2010, two months before the Open Doors Day, and spent half a day listening to his astonishing account.

## The Clay Pot

Lee grew up in North Korea, which is often labeled Communist, but has as much in common with Hitler's Germany as Stalin's Soviet Union. Christianity is completely forbidden, and just possessing a Bible can lead to lifelong detention in a concentration camp comparable to the infamous camps of the Third Reich during World War II.

So as a child, and even as an adult, Lee did not know that his parents were followers of Jesus Christ. He only knew that they were different from others. His father and mother were even said to be "Communist parents", an unofficial honorary title for people who

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are known to be caring. It is one of the most loving ways of describing someone in North Korea. Lee's father and mother helped the poor, the sick and the hungry. The Lee family was used to sharing what they had with others.

"My mother often asked me questions to shape me. For example, she would ask, 'What do you do if you see someone who is hungry?' Of course, I knew what the right answers were: share your food with others, clothe those who have no clothing and care for the sick in the same way that you would care for your parents."

Lee did know where his parents gained their wisdom. Every evening when it was dark, they went out into the garden and dug up a clay pot, which they then brought indoors. Hidden in the pot was a little, black book. His parents would read to one another, but never when the children were there. The black book was something that must not be mentioned, certainly not to other people.

"My parents were very firm about this. Never mention it. Not to friends, not to neighbors, not at school. Otherwise the police would come. Yes, and when North Korean parents threaten the arrival of the police, children know that it is serious. Sometimes parents even abuse this. For example if the children will not go to sleep. 'Watch out! Be quiet now! Otherwise the police will come and get you.' Children then immediately stop being naughty."

And so Lee and his brothers and sisters kept quiet. No one wanted to end up in a concentration camp. Even though they did not know the words "Bible", "Jesus" or "God", it was clear to them that the black book was something illegal.

The stories that father and mother told, which Lee was sure came from the black book, were also forbidden. For example, they told about a man who went to a mountain and was given two stones from heaven with ten important rules on them. There was a story about a great flood, from which only a few people and many animals were saved. And his parents liked to talk about a wise man that sat on a mountain and gave important teaching about how people should live.

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In a country where Christianity was completely forbidden, and even owning a Bible is enough for the whole family to be locked up in a concentration camp, this is the only way that parents can tell their children anything about the Bible. The Bible stories are dressed up as “fairy tales” and all Christian terms are omitted. Only when the children are old and wise enough do parents dare to tell them the whole gospel.

From that moment, the children have a choice. Will they follow the God of the Bible and so opt for a perilous existence? Or will they reject it and continue to believe in the divine status of the leaders? Or will they even report their parents in order to secure their own future?

### Spirit of Martyrdom

“Every Christian in North Korea has accepted the spirit of martyrdom,” an important Open Doors contact for North Korea once told me. “Everyone who comes to faith knows that a day will come when it will be shown whether this faith is steadfast. Then the person will be tortured and put under pressure to deny the faith. This is the sword of Damocles that is hanging over every Christian in North Korea.”

This may be the reason why Lee’s parents never told Lee about the gospel, not even when he was grown up, married and found a job as a history teacher at a secondary school. Perhaps they did not want Lee to live under such pressure. He never asked them.

Even apart from this, life became harder and harder. In 1995, just a year after the Great Leader Kim Il-Sung died, famine struck the country. The famine was the result of decades of mismanagement. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea had been supported by the Communist bloc, but then suddenly it had to pay market prices for oil, food and other raw materials and goods. Lee still remembers well the first deaths. “There was a boy of twelve in

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my class, complaining of a terrible stomach ache. He was crying and I sent for his seventeen-year-old sister to take him home. She put him on her back and left. A little while later, we were phoned by the hospital. Both children had been found unconscious in the street.”

All the teachers went to the hospital. There, Lee was told that the children did not have long to live. The brother and sister were in beds next to one another. “I sat between them and held their hands. Suddenly the girl squeezed my hand and said, “Sir!” She took one more breath and her eyes slowly closed. Her brother died just a few moments later. Their parents were already dead.”

This tragedy was the start of a protracted agony. Many children died, even at school. The town in which the school was located was hit particularly badly. It was an industrial town with hardly any green spaces. Not everyone was able to go into the hills to find edible plants and grass.

Lee, his wife and two children survived, but they had to eat anything they could find, including gruel made from tree bark. “The people’s appearance changed. Everyone looked worse and worse. My sight deteriorated too. When you’re starving, a sort of yellow haze descends on everything you see. And when you’re sitting down and want to get up again, you have to use all the strength you have. I was sometimes sweating all over my body. Sometimes I saw people lie down and not have the strength to get up again. They died on the spot.”

Despite the fact that the first priority was now to survive, Lee thought a lot. The hatred in his heart grew. He hated the Party, which determined all aspects of life in the Communist “paradise”. He hated the lies of the regime of Kim Jong-Il, who succeeded his father Kim Il-Sung as the leader.

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## The Flight

One cold winter's day in 1996, the rage led to an outburst at the wrong moment. He got into an argument with the party member who was responsible for the school. "I became so angry that I threw a number of books on the floor. They were books written by Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il and their pictures were on the covers."

His deed was equal to sacrilege. The party member was furious and screamed at Lee, "I'm going to report you! You'll be executed!"

This was serious. If Lee wanted to survive, he only had one choice. He had to get away. And as soon as possible. He ran out of the school. How much time did he have? He did not know. A telephone call would not take a moment. By the time he got home, the police might already be standing at the door. There was no time to go to his wife and children. He had to leave the country. Lee ran to the station and was fortunate. A train was leaving, taking a great load of coal to the north. He hid between the coals. The train did not go to China, but it did go to the border area. So Lee had to jump off. Fortunately there was a thick layer of snow on the ground on this cold day. He walked to the River Tumen, which was frozen at this time of year. The river was not yet as well guarded as now and he was easily able to cross the last forty yards that separated him from China, even though he had to wade through thick drifts of snow. By then, his right foot and left ear were badly frostbitten.

He walked a hundred yards into China and reached a village. Lee saw a woman and immediately approached her. She was a woman of Korean descent (In the northeast of China, there are two to three million Chinese Koreans.). Lee was barely able to utter a word after the difficult journey. He was only able to say that he was a North Korean who had fled. He was hungry and exhausted.

Lee wept and so did the 65-year-old woman. She helped him up and took him home, where she let him lie on the floor. Just like most Korean houses, this house had floor heating. She cut open Lee's boots and saw that his right foot was considerably swollen

because of the frostbite. She went outside to get some snow to rub onto his feet. Lee was given some food and hot tea and slowly regained strength.

“I had escaped certain death. Relief was the feeling that dominated, as if I had returned from death to life.”

To start with, China seemed like a dream. There was food in abundance, the smell of cooking oil filled the streets and people looked happy. No one was dying of hunger. But the first time that Lee ate Chinese food, he was sick. His body was not used to real food and it took some time before he could eat normally.

### **“Your eternal life starts here”**

In total, Lee spent five and a half years in China. The worst years of his life, he says now. Most of the time, he had to beg to survive. He was always fleeing. He used a piece of vinyl to make a sort of plastic tent in the woods, in which he could sleep. Sometimes he had to work as a lumberjack or a miner in a coalmine. He was never given money for his work. His bosses paid him in food and sometimes with accommodation. Lee would have liked to go back to his family in North Korea, or at least to contact them. He was not able to, or he could not manage it.

In 1998, a year after Lee arrived in China, Lee’s mother crossed the river border. She managed to trace Lee and they met. On the first reunion, Lee’s mother burst into tears. Finally she was able to tell him the secret that she was carrying with her.

“She took my hand and led me to a Chinese state church. We went and sat in the empty church building and she began to explain that in 1935, at the age of nine, she had become a Christian and her parents had followed Him too. She spoke about the Bible, about the Fall, about God and Jesus’ sacrifice. My mother yearned for the first years of her faith. At that time, Korea was occupied by the Japanese and they persecuted the Christians. Still, everyone served one an-

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other. She told me I had been born to her, but I was really a child of God.”

“He will protect you and care for you,” she said. “Believe in Him. Be faithful. Your eternal life starts here.”

It was silent for a moment and then Lee’s mother started to pray. It was the first prayer that she had been able to say aloud since 1945. As loud as she wanted. The prayer lasted for three hours. She prayed for Lee and the North Korean people. “Please save them, Lord!”

After the “Amen”, the elderly woman was shaking from the exertion. Her whole body was damp with sweat. Lee was convinced that God existed and he wanted to dedicate his life to Him.

## Betrayed

Between 1998 and 2001, Lee and his mother tried to save money so that the rest of the family could come to live in China. They did not manage to. They hardly had enough means to survive themselves.

Still, the difficult circumstances did not bother his mother. She often had the chance to speak in the Korean speaking churches and to speak about God’s love for people. She did not realize that, in the end, this would put her life in serious danger.

One day in 2001, one of Lee’s brothers came to China. He was shocked by the vagrant existence that Lee and his mother were leading. After four months, he persuaded his mother to return to North Korea. Lee himself was wanted in North Korea because of his offense. He could no longer return home. For his mother, there was still hope. She could maintain that she has been with relatives because of the famine.

Lee’s mother publically bid farewell to a church that had helped her and where she sometimes spoke. She said that she was going to cross the river that week with her son (Lee’s brother), and she asked for prayer. She did not realize that there was a traitor in the church.

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The day came when Lee's mother and brother were going to attempt the crossing. Lee was to accompany them to the border. The three of them walked the last stretch together. A few hundred yards from the water, Lee's mother stopped. She turned round and placed her hands on Lee. It was a moment before Lee realized that she was praying for him.

"She prayed for over half an hour," says Lee. "All that time she was blessing me and pleading for me. When she stopped, she looked at me and said, 'You must not die. You have to survive this and become a pastor. Help people, especially the poor, the sick, the widows and the orphans. Always serve Jesus.'"

This was the last prayer that Lee's mother said out loud.

A little while later, Lee saw his mother and brother wading through the water. It was not very deep at this point, but the current could be strong. Spiritually, his mother was a strong woman, but she was over seventy-five. Still she reached the other side relatively easily.

And then it happened. Lee can still see the events passing before him in slow motion. On the opposite bank of the river, the contours of a jeep became visible. Two soldiers jumped out of the vehicle. Another two troops appeared from the high grass. Lee's heart started to beat violently. They had been betrayed!

The two refugees in the water did not have the chance to turn back again. The soldiers already had their guns at the ready. When they came out of the water, Lee's mother was hit with the butt of a rifle. She lay on the ground motionless. Her son was stabbed with a bayonet. Both died on the spot.

Lee sat helpless on the opposite bank, hidden between the bushes. The soldiers knew he was there and started to shoot and call out. Lee was in shock. He wished he had a gun. "I would certainly have gone into the water and tried to kill those soldiers."

There was still space for one other thought. He had to fetch his mother's body and give her a decent funeral. But he could not go to the other side. That would mean the end.

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He ran away. He had seen a village nearby. He had to ask for help! He knocked on the door of the first house. An old man opened it. Lee dropped on his knees and haltingly told his tale. The old man was moved to tears and drummed up another forty people. They went to the place where Lee had seen how his mother and brother had been killed.

The soldiers still had not left. Two young Chinese men jumped into the water and waded to the bodies, which were still lying in the water. The torrent of abuse from the North Koreans was horrendous. But they did not do anything to the Chinese, and they managed to get the body of Lee's mother.

"I was able to bury her, but for four months, I was completely in shock," says Lee. "I felt nothing and thought nothing. There was no life in me anymore. Actually, I was one of the living dead, a zombie. There was only one thing I wanted: to get as far away from this country as possible. I had to get to safety. To South Korea. But I was angry with God too. I railed at Him, but I prayed too. I decided to do everything humanly possible to get away."

## The Angel

Lee started to look for one of the many underground networks that "smuggle" people to South Korea. It did not take long before he had found the right person and in August 2001, he set out with two other North Korean refugees. As South Korea only borders with North Korea and the rest is surrounded by sea, North Korean refugees have only one way to reach South Korea. They have to get into a South Korean embassy or consulate. The South Korean law requires the government to provide asylum to any refugee from the North.

But foreign embassies and consulates in China are heavily guarded by Chinese police. Because of this, most refugees decide to go to Mongolia, Thailand, Cambodia or Vietnam. These routes also entail great risks. First, the North Korean has to make the long

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journey across China. Following this, there are several dangerous border crossings.

Together with his fellow refugees, Lee managed to reach Vietnam relatively easily. However, the crossing into Cambodia was the most dangerous point in the whole journey. He was extremely worried about whether he would reach the other side safely. "I knew that many North Koreans had been arrested at this point. Still, in the end I fell asleep anyway. I dreamt of a huge angel, surrounded by a shining light. He told me that I should follow him. At that point, I woke up."

Lee opened his eyes and the angel was still standing in front of him. Again the angel told Lee that he should follow him. He woke his two companions. They could not see the angel, but still they followed Lee.

They went through woods, over a hill, and all the time the angel walked ahead of them. It was a seven-hour walk. The angel did not say a word until the sun came up. Then the angel turned round, smiled and said, "You are now free. There are no more obstacles." Lee realized that they had reached Cambodia safely.

"The angel disappeared," said Lee. "I do not doubt that Jesus sent this angel to rescue us."

The words of the heavenly being proved true. The refugees were able to reach the South Korean embassy without any difficulty. Soon afterward, Lee was in an airplane to South Korea where he was given a new passport.

Once in South Korea, he had to follow an obligatory integration course. Then he enrolled at a theological university. By now, he is qualified as a pastor. "My calling is to preach. I have never forgotten the words of my mother. I was to become a servant of God. She died as a martyr and I am the son of a martyr. I'll never forget that."

In 2004, after Lee had saved enough money, he called on an underground network to find out how his family was in the North. What he heard shocked him deeply.

Lee's father, brothers and sisters had all been murdered. Shortly

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after Lee's disappearance, his wife had been obliged to divorce him and had probably married another man. He did not know where she was now, only that she had taken their daughter with her. His son, Hyo, had been living on the streets for over seven years. His tale is the following.

### Floating Swallows

Hyo is a cheerful, slightly artless boy. He seems like a teenager, even though he is in his early twenties. He has a good heart. He wants to be a dentist and is studying for this in Europe. Later he wants to do development work in Africa. Hyo loves children, especially orphans. He wants to adopt at least ten. It is no wonder that he has a soft spot for orphans. Both his parents are still alive, and yet since the age of eight, Hyo has felt like an orphan because his parents abandoned him.

Even though circumstances forced Lee and his first wife (he was married again in South Korea to another North Korean, Chan-Sook) to leave their son behind, this is of no help to a child. From one day to the next, his parents were gone. First his father disappeared from his life, and later his mother and little sister.

The first time that I met Hyo was the day before his father was to speak at the Open Doors Day in the Netherlands. We arranged for them to spend some time together in the Netherlands. It was the first time that Hyo met his father's new wife, whom Lee had married the year before.

A few months later, in March 2011, Hyo again comes to the Netherlands for the weekend. This time he is to speak at various locations at Shockwave, a global event for young people. At Amsterdam airport, for the first time, I speak to him at length. It is not an easy conversation. Physically Hyo is present, but his thoughts are elsewhere. Mentally, he takes me back to the day when his father failed to come home, to the streets where he tried to survive,

to China where he was shot, and even to the North Korean prison where he almost lost his life. And still God was constantly there. He always sent people on Hyo's path so that, more than once, he was rescued from certain death.

"It's difficult to tell my story," says Hyo. "I've never spoken to anyone about it in detail, but it's important that the world knows. People must know what North Korea is like, so that they can pray, especially for the kotjebi—the floating swallows, as North Koreans call the many street children in their country. For years, I was one of them."

### **The Day on Which Everything Changed**

We go back to 1996, to the day on which everything changed. Until that day, Hyo had led a relatively carefree existence. "I was used to thanking the leaders for the food we had. On their birthdays, I was given a flower by my father and had to place it before the statue in our village. When I was playing, I pretended to be fighting the Americans and the South Koreans. They were our enemies. On the television, we saw cartoons in which North Koreans defeated them. Sometimes they also showed cartoons about Christian missionaries. They captured North Korean children and wrote on their foreheads with poisonous ink. That really scared me."

But there was no need for Hyo to be afraid. As far as he knew, there were no Christians in his country. The great leaders took good care of the people. But Kim Jong-Il was not able to prevent famine reaching Hyo's village. "One day, one of my classmates didn't come to school. The whole class went to visit him. His face was completely swollen. When we got home, I was crying and my father gave me some food I could take to him. I felt sorry for him. Still, we didn't talk much about the famine. Everyone knew that talking was the same as complaining, and complaining is fatal in North Korea."

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Lee, too, knew that complaining could have deadly consequences. Still, that's what he did, and at just the wrong moment. He fled to China and—as he puts it himself—was given his life back. Hyo's experience of this fatal day was very different. He was not told anything about the argument that his father had had at the school where he taught. His father simply did not come home again.

The police did appear at the door. The seven-year-old Hyo and his sister, who was three-years younger, listened at a distance while their mother spoke to them. The officers were polite and their mother showed no emotion. She did not know where her husband was or when he would be home. Little was said about the disappearance of Lee. Hyo cannot remember his mother ever explaining why his father had left.

The consequences soon became apparent. Hyo felt people staring at him in the street. No one wanted to have anything to do with him. “Suddenly I was the son of a traitor. My father had become a criminal in everyone's eyes.”

Hyo's mother also began to “travel around”. Perhaps she, too, went to China to look for food. Hyo does not know. Before she went away for a time, she would prepare some food. Hyo was told that he had to look after his sister. He had to do the cooking and collect firewood in the hills. He slept with a knife under his pillow. “Thieves would certainly break in if they knew that there were no adults at home. I had to protect us.”

## Alone in the World

One day his mother came back and took her daughter with her. They left and never came back again. Hyo does not know why and does not want to think about it. Of all the things that Hyo experienced in his life, this was the greatest blow: that his parents left him behind alone. Like the young boy Remi in the famous book by Hector Malot, Hyo was suddenly alone in the world.

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It was some time before Hyo realized that no one was coming back for him. First he lived for a time with his maternal grandmother. She had a son of fifteen, who did not like having to share the scarce food with Hyo. The money had almost gone. Hyo's parents' house was sold so that the three could continue to manage for some time. But Hyo became increasingly miserable. He was tired of the bullying by his fifteen-year-old uncle and wanted to leave the village because everyone knew him as the son of a traitor. He made a decision.

“Grandmother, I'm going away.”

Hyo may not have been older than eight, but he was resolute. His grandmother was elderly, the money would soon be gone, and what then? He preferred to venture his chances as a vagrant. He would go to a neighboring town and make the best of things there. His grandmother did not stop him. Perhaps she was no longer able to care for him and so could see no other solution. Or perhaps she had become used to the fact that many North Korean children live on the streets. She gave Hyo some money and he walked to the station.

Just as his father had done a year before, Hyo was now a stow-away on the train. He hid between two wagons. Two other boys—brothers of nine and ten years old—had come upon the same idea. They immediately became friends.

“Their parents had starved to death,” says Hyo. “These boys became so important to me. They had been living on the streets for some time and taught me all I needed to know to survive: how to steal food from the market, how to keep out of the hands of the police, which violent groups of orphans we had better avoid. They were the best friends I had ever had. I loved them more than my own family.”

Most orphans who survived the harsh existence on the streets ended up in mafia-type criminality. The three boys wanted to avoid this. They dreamed of a fine future with their own house. “When we were grown up, the three of us were going to start some sort of

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business together. Until then, we had to stay alive. So we slept at the station under stationary trains to give us some protection from the cold. We went into the fields and sifted through the cowpats looking for any undigested grains of corn. We washed them in water and then ate them.”

It was an effort for Hyo to adapt to the life of a vagrant, but he managed. With his friends, he was safe. Together they could do anything. But the conditions in which they were living weakened the boys. When Hyo was eleven, all three of them became sick. Hyo’s friends were very weak. “I held onto them and they both died in my arms. The worst moment in my life. Again I was completely alone.”

Hyo survived. God intervened, even though Hyo did not yet know Him. Why God did not save his friends, Hyo does not know. “I was fortunate,” he says. “There was a woman who saw me and was concerned about me. This is a miracle in and of itself in North Korea. In my country, the survival of the fittest applies. Everyone wants to survive, but this woman had pity on me and bought me medicines. I slowly recovered. Still I wasn’t happy. I missed my friends so terribly. Never had I felt so alone. I had no one anymore. Of course God was there, I know that now, but in that moment I did not perceive Him. I hadn’t even heard of Him.”

Again, God brought someone along Hyo’s path who helped him. It was a North Korean businessman who occasionally hired orphans to carry his bags. Hyo was offered a job. It was risky. “A big risk, in fact. How did I know whether I could trust this man? Many street children were abducted and killed so that their organs and blood could be sold. But I had no choice. I had to trust him.”

His trust was not betrayed. In the years that followed, Hyo continued to work for the businessman. He was given regular meals, accommodation and clean clothes by the man. Sometimes Hyo went to his home. Then he saw his children. “I was jealous. They looked so happy and went to school. I wanted that too. To live a normal life again, to learn a trade, to prepare for my future.”

## Evaporated Illusion

It took some time before Hyo finally took the plunge. When he turned fifteen, he told the businessman that he wanted to go back to school. The man tried to talk him out of it. Most likely the man saw better than Hyo that he was chasing an illusion. Despite this, the man bought Hyo a school uniform out of gratitude for his service. After having lived on the streets for almost eight years, Hyo returned to his grandmother.

“I went back to school, but I had to work so hard. I had missed eight years of education and had to catch up as quickly as possible. I didn’t mind. I wanted to realize my dream: to join the army. That was where my future lay.”

For North Koreans, it is not possible to climb up the social ladder, only to fall off of it. Anyone who is born into a working class family will remain working class. Anyone who is caught committing a serious offense (such as insulting the leader or fleeing to China) is then allocated to the “hostile class”. There is only one way for people from almost all levels of society to get ahead: by joining the army.

Soon after his return to the village, Hyo applied. At the age of seventeen, he was able to sign up. According to what he says, he got quite far in the application process. At the last interview, something happened that he had not expected. The officer put the file of Hyo’s father on the desk. On it was a black stamp with the abbreviation of the “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”, the official name of North Korea. A black stamp meant that Lee, and with him his son Hyo, belonged to the hostile class.

“I could not be admitted to the army. All hope of a good future in North Korea was now gone. I was ashamed of my background and hated my father. Because of his indiscretions, I was now in this hopeless situation. I just had to get out of North Korea, but I didn’t know how.”

But Hyo did not have to wait for long. By then, Lee had reached South Korea and had already paid people six times to look for Hyo

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in North Korea, but they could never find him. Now that Hyo was living with his grandmother, they managed to track him down. One day, a man came up to Hyo and told him that he had been sent by his father. Hyo could not believe it. Was his father still alive then? The man had a Chinese mobile phone with him and phoned Lee so that Lee could talk to his son. “It was a strange telephone conversation,” says Hyo. “I did not recognize my father’s voice. I had spent half my life without him. My father asked me all about the members of the family. I answered him. In this way, he was making sure that I was his son. He wanted me to go to China to meet him. I agreed because I knew that I would never have a good life in North Korea.”

Hyo followed the intermediary and went with him to China. At the border, they bribed the soldiers, but they still had to swim across the river border. The current was strong. The water almost overpowered Hyo. He had to use all his strength to get across. Once he was on the bank, he looked back at his fatherland. “I thought that it was the last time in my life that I would see North Korea.”

In China, Hyo stayed in various shelters for North Korean refugees. Most of these shelters were run by Chinese-Korean Christians. The Chinese government punishes those who help refugees with hefty fines or even prison sentences. Still there are Christians who, through neighborly love, take care of the people who escape from North Korea.

So it is no wonder that Hyo ended up in a Christian shelter. There were other children in the shelter. They were doing something that made Hyo afraid. “They were reading a book with a cross on the cover. I had always learned that the cross was a symbol of evil, of the devil. I was terrified. Besides this, everyone prayed before meals, even the North Korean children. Very strange. After a few days, I escaped out of the window. I had some money, went to a telephone booth in the street, and telephoned the number of my father.”

Lee’s response was not what Hyo had expected. “While I was telling my tale, my father began to laugh really loudly. He sent

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someone to get me and I was taken to another shelter where I felt more comfortable.”

After some time, Lee came to China in order to finally meet his son again. “Someone collected me from the shelter and took me to the place where I was to see my father. There were two men, and I thought they’d take me on to somewhere else. One of them was wearing sunglasses. The other stepped forward and pointed to him. ‘Young man, that’s your father,’ he said.”

Hyo did not recognize him and Lee began to cry. “Only then did I realize that it really was my father standing in front of me. It was not a joyful reunion. All sorts of emotions battled in me. Joy, sorrow and anger were fighting to take over. He took me to a restaurant, but I couldn’t be close to him and went and sat at a table next to his. He tried to talk to me, but the first hours I said practically nothing.”

In the end, they agreed that Hyo would try to go to South Korea through a South Korean embassy. Lee went to find people who could take him there.

### **“God, where are You?”**

It seemed as if he was running in a dream world. Hyo no longer felt his legs and feet, as if he were floating above the ground. Still, he was moving forward quickly. Even the automatic gunfire sounded far away, as if someone had left the television on. Until he heard a gentle “Uhhh” next to him and his thirteen-year-old friend fell down backwards. He turned to look. Suddenly he felt a sharp pain in his foot and saw a bullet hole in his shoe. Hyo was back in reality.

The plan was so simple. Lee had arranged for Hyo to travel with seventeen other refugees and a guide to the Mongolian border. They would cross the border and then report to the border guards, who would take them to the South Korean embassy. Lee would wait

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for Hyo in South Korea, where, just like his father, he would be able to begin a new life.

The plan went wrong. The guide took the group of eighteen by train and van to a place near the Mongolian border. But he stopped a couple of miles or so from the border. He gave someone a wire cutter and told the group, "You have to walk a mile or so in that direction. After some time, you'll come to a tall fence with barbed wire. You cut it and walk some way into Mongolia. Then you wait until it is daylight. The border guards patrol the border every day. Hand yourselves over to them. They will take care of the rest."

Hyo still does not know whether the guide sent them in the wrong direction or the North Koreans themselves made a mistake. The fact is that after some time walking, they came to a big meadow—with barbed wire. It was so loose that they did not even need the wire cutters. They walked some way from the fence and decided to wait until it became light.

They were still in China. The refugees realized this immediately with the first rays of the sun. Panic struck them. No one knew which way they should go. They wanted to get to safety and walked off. By the side of the road, there was a Chinese farmer, and one of the North Koreans asked him, in his best Chinese, which way it was to Mongolia. A fatal mistake.

"A few hundred yards straight on," the farmer pointed in a certain direction. The refugees went on. In the meantime, the farmer telephoned the Chinese authorities. It was not long before a military jeep came along. Seven soldiers jumped out. "We immediately started to run," says Hyo. "We went in all directions. There were seven of them and eighteen of us. They could never catch us all. I went off in one direction with a new friend, a boy of thirteen. We wanted to get away from the soldiers as quickly as possible."

Suddenly the sound of automatic gunfire was heard. His thirteen-year-old friend was shot in the back with a bullet, which came out again through his chest. At almost the same moment, Hyo was hit in the foot. He dropped to his knees next to his severely injured

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friend. “No, no, no!” screamed Hyo. “No! You mustn’t die like this! God, help us! Where are You?”

He looked at his friend. Within a few seconds, it was over. For the third time in Hyo’s life, a friend had died in his arms.

The fact that Hyo had cried out to God was something new for him. The Chinese Christians who had helped him in the shelter had told him to call on God if things were difficult. This was the ultimate moment for him to try it.

God remained—by all appearances—silent. There was no vision, no angel, no thunder from heaven, no peace in Hyo’s heart. Instead, he felt hatred flowing through him. He hated the world, particularly the guide, the farmer and his father. Lee was not there when Hyo was being shot at. He was safely in South Korea. He had trusted that the attempt to escape would succeed. Hyo only knew that his father had let him make the last step of the journey alone and was once again not there when he was in trouble.

The officers arrested Hyo and the sixteen others who had survived the shooting. He was taken to the hospital, where the bullet wound to his foot was treated. Then he was to be taken like the others to a prison, the last stop before the unavoidable repatriation to the country that Hyo had expected never to see again.

### **“Welcome back”**

From this point on, the story becomes too much for Hyo. He does not want to go on. We agree that he will continue sharing after the weekend—once he has given his talks at the youth prayer event Shockwave.

On Monday morning, when I take Hyo back to the airport, we again sit in the self-service restaurant. While he is drinking his coke, I ask him if we can continue with the interview from the moment of his arrest in China. He nods, but his otherwise cheerful eyes have taken on a darker appearance. His voice sounds much

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heavier—even more adult—than before.

“Would you describe your return trip to North Korea?” I ask him. “We were treated well in China and were given two meals a day, but we didn’t want to go back. So we went on hunger strike. This didn’t matter much to the Chinese. They were going to deport us anyway. Our hands and feet were bound and we were taken like that to the bus. We drove to the border and then crossed a bridge. Then we arrived at the prison and had to get out. I didn’t know what was awaiting me. My death warrant had already been signed, I thought.”

Hyo swallows before continuing. “There were various soldiers and police officers waiting for us. One of them looked really mean. He looked at me and said, ‘Welcome back. You should never have escaped.’”

“What did the prison look like?” I ask Hyo.

“Actually, like an ordinary, dull, single story building. But there were several floors below ground level.”

“How do you know?”

“I was on all four stories. I was always blindfolded and taken downstairs. I counted the steps and the number of floors. The further they took me down, the more severely I was tortured.”

Then, for the first time, Hyo tells about the most difficult days in his life. On the first floor, the interrogation was not too bad. The inspectors mainly tried to confuse him. One moment they promised him an interesting job and a good future if he were to cooperate. The next moment they asked him, “Surely you don’t think you are going to survive this, do you?”

The interrogators mainly wanted information about Hyo’s father. Evidently Lee was still being sought. “They wanted me to say where he was, but I had decided not to say anything. Nothing at all, whatever they would do to me.”

A hood was put over Hyo’s head and he was taken to a lower floor. In this room he was tortured for the first time. On the desk, there was a pen and paper. “I had to write down information. When I refused, they pushed my fingers backwards. That was painful...”

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He shows me his right forefinger. "It's still not in the proper place." Hyo draws his hand back, looking at his finger himself. "The next day, they began to hit me on the back with sticks. They would say that I could return to ordinary life, and then that I would be sent to a camp. They tried to confuse me, but I didn't give in."

After several days of torture, they took Hyo to the lowest floor. He was put in a cell by himself. There were ropes hanging from the ceiling and a type of oven was installed. There were also metal pots, pans and sticks. "This was my new cell. I regularly heard people screaming in other cells. I was so scared of being there."

Two guards came into the cell. "They looked like pigs," Hyo relates. He cannot find any other words to describe the men. They hung the fifteen-year-old by his feet from the ceiling and beat him with clubs until his was unconscious. He was brought round with cold water. Then the torture continued.

Hyo was certain that he would die. The guards left the cell and he was given some watery soup to eat. He slept on the cold, concrete floor. The next day, the men continued their torture. First, there were more questions about his father and the false promises. And then again, "You don't think you're going to survive this, do you?"

The hope of survival had indeed gone. And so Hyo again screamed in his thoughts to the God whom he did not know. It was a prayer of despair, which only consisted of shrieks, "Help me! Help me! Save me!" The torture became worse. Hyo was beaten with red-hot pipes, which caused burns on his shoulders, thighs and legs. He only withstood it for a few minutes before he lost consciousness again.

### **"I have a son, too"**

At one point, an inspector came into Hyo's cell. Hyo recognized him. He had been the first to interrogate Hyo and had not used

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torture. Still, Hyo was on his guard. Every day might be his last. No one could be trusted. Besides this, Hyo had no strength left. Everything hurt.

The man looked at Hyo. He seemed to be examining him. Was that pity in his eyes? It was hard to say.

“I have a son of fifteen too,” he said suddenly. And then, “In three days time, you have to appear in court, but it would seem that you’re not well enough to stand trial. You can go home for three days to recover. Then you must come back to the prison. You have three days. You know what that means, don’t you?”

Hyo was barely able to answer, but he knew very well what it meant: the man was giving him three days to escape.

Two soldiers picked Hyo up and took the fifteen-year-old boy to the prison gates. Outside, they threw down some straw and put him on it. In the meantime, a guard telephoned Hyo’s grandmother. She was to come and get him. It was almost three hours before she arrived.

“I heard her screaming when she saw me,” says Hyo. “I wasn’t able to walk, but she borrowed a wheelbarrow from someone. In that, she took me to the train station. The journey to my grandmother’s house only took an hour.”

His grandmother begged for medicines and food and tried to treat Hyo’s wounds as best she could. “She was saying the whole time, ‘You can’t die before I die. You can’t die before I die.’”

The hours crept by. The moment when Hyo had to return to prison was drawing closer. Hyo’s grandmother knew someone who would take people to the border for payment, only she did not have any money. So she pleaded with the woman to take him anyway. “His father has plenty of money. If you get him to China, he will pay you.”

The guide agreed. She took Hyo with her. For a large part of the way to the border, she carried him on her back. Barely two days after his release from prison and sixteen days after the Chinese police had brought him back to his country, Hyo again found himself at

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the river border. This time he was too weak to cross and he still had serious burns on his body.

Another miracle happened. Hyo's guide bribed the border guards and asked them to help get Hyo to the opposite bank. His body was wrapped in plastic and the soldiers carried him to the other side of the river.

Once in China, Hyo telephoned his father. He almost had a heart attack when he heard his son's voice. The only thing he knew was that his son had never reached Mongolia. He had already been in China for some time looking for information about Hyo. So far, it had been in vain. He had been in contact with relatives of some of the other seventeen refugees in Hyo's group.

Hyo and his father met in a hotel. There Lee paid the guide and she left. Lee was shocked to see how bad his fifteen-year-old son looked. The next day, the relatives of the other refugees came to see Hyo. They hoped for good news from Hyo about the other refugees, but he had to disappoint them. When he told them about what had happened at the Mongolian border and the death of the thirteen-year-old boy, he had to explain that he had not heard anything more about the others. He did not even know if they were still alive.

In Korean culture, honor plays a great role. For this reason, Lee apologized to the other family members for the fact that only he had escaped.

Hyo himself was too weak to take in much of what was said in the hotel room. After the other people had left, Lee took Hyo to a type of vacation house. He hired a nurse, and slowly but surely, in the months that followed, Hyo recovered.

## A Flawed Plan

In the meantime, Lee thought of a new plan to get Hyo out of China safely. He came into contact with some people who were organizing an attempt to have a group of refugees apply for asylum in Amer-

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ica. Hyo was to go with them to the city of Shanghai, enter into an American school there, and then apply for asylum.

So a few weeks later, Hyo found himself in a van somewhere in Shanghai. Hyo and seven other North Korean refugees—all women and children—were given a paper on which something was written that they could not read. According to the guide, it was in English, the language of the Americans, and it said that they were North Koreans and wanted asylum in America.

The plan was flawed. None of those involved seemed to realize that Hyo and the others were putting themselves in great danger. The first phase went well. When they got off the bus, they ran to the school fence. Within a minute, the first of them had climbed over. Then, the group of eight ran as fast as they could into the school.

In the school, panic broke out. Who were these Asians who had suddenly forced their way into the school? The guards came and kept the group standing in the reception hall. The principal soon arrived and the refugees showed him their papers. None of them spoke English and the staff did not speak any Korean. The principal sent for a translator and told the group that they could not be granted asylum at the school because it did not have the status of an embassy.

“We are obliged to warn the authorities, but we will not prevent you from leaving.”

“The North Koreans were confused, seemingly in ‘a state of shock,’” one of the pupils later wrote in a letter mailed to a human rights organization. Hyo never understood that the principal had advised them to leave. They did not go anywhere until officers of the Chinese security service, the PSB, arrived.

It was 5pm on Monday, September 27, 2004, one hour and twenty minutes after they had climbed over the fence. Hyo remembers it well. It was the moment when he thought that his life really was over.

“I was certain that the Chinese would deport me again, and this time, I would not survive my stay in the North Korean prison. They

would execute me there or torture me to death. I was not panicking. I did not feel anything anymore; it was as if I was anaesthetized.”

In the Chinese cell, Hyo was well cared for, but he was sharing the cell with unusual company: a Chinese gangster, a Korean Christian, and a foreign drug smuggler. They tried to encourage him, but all their attempts were in vain. Hyo became increasingly depressed and tried to take his own life by swallowing pills several times.

The Korean Christian urged Hyo to pray. “I had plenty of time to think, and indeed, I reflected more and more on God. In China, I had heard many people talking about Him and I knew that He was the Lord of my father’s life. Might He really exist? I was not convinced of this. When I asked Him to spare my friend at the Mongolian border, He did not do anything. At the same time, I was desperate. So I prayed, ‘God, if You really exist, let me survive this. Rescue me.’”

One day, the guards came into the cell and told Hyo that he had to come. This is it then, he thought. Now I’ll be sent back. He said goodbye to his cellmates. Surrounded by guards, he walked down the corridors. There seemed to be no end to them. The men indicated that he should go into an office.

Hyo did not expect to see anything but the severe faces of North Korean government officials. It was a great shock when the door opened. Behind the desk sat two white men. Americans!

Hyo could barely understand what they were saying through their interpreter. He had to be patient. He would then be released. Which country did he want to go to? He could choose wherever he wanted. Of course he chose South Korea. That was where his father lived.

When he got back to his cell, his cellmates were delirious with joy. Hyo himself still could not believe it. He was going to be released! Had God heard his prayers after all? He must have. The impossible had happened.

At that moment, Hyo placed his life in the hands of the God Whom he did not know. The God who had seen him when he had

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been sleeping under trains, who had sent people to help Hyo when he was living on the streets, who had brought him into contact with his father again, who had protected his life in the prison, and was now revealing Himself as a Savior.

A few days later Hyo left China, but not before his cellmates (the Christian, the drug smuggler and the gangster) had arranged a cake for him. It was the most wonderful celebration Hyo had ever had.

Hyo first flew to Japan, where he was given a South Korean passport, and then to South Korea. Later he moved to a Western country, where he is still living and studying dentistry.

All's well that ends well? Life is still not easy for him. Sometimes Hyo reminds me of Pinocchio, the wooden puppet who wants so much to be an ordinary boy. In the same way, there is nothing Hyo would like more than to live an ordinary life and to forget his background and past.

But this is difficult, if not impossible. As Hyo walks across the fields, he touches the plants and bushes. With his fingers and mouth, he tests what is edible. He does not want any cookies. He never had those in the past. He cannot get used to them. And he continues to have nightmares that take him back to the dark North Korea. Talking about his past is difficult for him too.

Besides this, he comes from a family that was broken apart by circumstances. His father has remarried. Hyo's real mother and his little sister (neither of whom he had seen for ten years) later reached South Korea. There is so much pain that they cannot really talk about the past.

Sometimes Hyo says, "I don't have any family anymore." But he knows that God is always with him. "He really proved to be my Father."

## The Bible in the Lives of Lee & Hyo

“The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Of course, this well-known verse refers to Jesus Christ, our Savior, but in the testimony of Lee about his parents, we see that it can also refer to us as people. Under the reign of the Kim family, they were no longer able to evangelize openly, but still, other North Koreans saw that the Lee family was different. They lived according to the Bible: they loved their neighbors and expressed this by caring for widows and orphans. What the Word prescribes became a reality in their lives.

In Job 2:6, God tells Satan, “Very well, then, he is in your hands; but you must spare his life.” The book of Job teaches us about suffering, suffering that is difficult to fathom. But one lesson comes clearly to the forefront, and that is that the main character Job was not informed about what was going on in heaven. We are given a glimpse. And even though it is difficult to understand why God agrees to the suggestion by Satan to test Job, we see that Satan needs permission from God for this. In other words, God is sovereign in every situation. He is never surprised by what the devil does to His followers. In the story of Lee Joo-Chan and Hyo, we may wonder why God allows things to happen and we may wonder why there is so much suffering. We can also present this question to God and admit that we do not understand it. In Job 38-41, you can read how sharply God speaks out. He demonstrates that He is sovereign and how insignificant we are.

Isaiah 43:11, “I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no savior” is the main theme of my novel about North Korea titled *Friends Forever*. When I wrote this book, I had not yet met Lee or Hyo, and still this theme is clearly evident in their lives. God saved both Lee and Hyo more than once, even when they did not yet know Him. But God knows His own. He knows who belongs to Him and He turns evil into good. Father and son experienced dreadful things, but without these tragedies they may not have become followers of Jesus.

## Why Do You Persecute Me

### For Reflection

When you experience suffering, do you then look at the circumstances or at God? Do you really trust in Him?

### What You Can Do

Become an ambassador for persecuted Christians and perhaps for Christians in North Korea in particular. This is quite easy to do. Share a message or story on Facebook, Twitter or another social media channel. Talk about it with other people. Share your thoughts and feelings with other Christians.

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your  
rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

*David (Psalm 23:4)*



# HAE-WOO

## NORTH KOREA

### *Evangelizing in a Prison Camp*

Hae-Woo was born in the 1940's in a town that borders South Korea. Her mother was a Christian, but Hae-Woo had no idea about this. She came to faith later in life. Her life story is shocking, and at the same time, powerful. So powerful that I will now let her speak for herself. No explanation is needed to see how God is at work in her life.

“My name is Hae-Woo and I was born in North Korea. As a young child, I was confronted with war and loss. When the Korean War broke out in 1950, our village was on the border between the North and the South, which meant it was right on the front line. It wasn't long before North Korean soldiers appeared and told everyone that they had to leave. My mother, sister and I left too. My father had already been called to serve as a doctor in the army. We were never to see him again. He died during the war.

We went on foot in the direction of the Chinese border. We actually wanted to go in the other direction. My parents had pre-

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viously had plans to flee to South Korea. Perhaps this was because they were Christians and Kim Il-Sung had already made it clear in the forties that he opposed Christianity. Probably they didn't feel safe. I don't know. My mother always kept her faith hidden from me. We never followed through with the plan to leave. My mother was too sick to do so. But when the war broke out, we didn't have any choice. Despite her poor health, my mother had to walk with us to the Chinese border.

### Bombers

There we were, surrounded by the violence of war, on our way to the Chinese border. We walked mainly at night. During the day, we hid from the American bombers. I can still see those planes in my mind's eye. I can't understand why they were dropping bombs on innocent civilians.

It took us two months to reach the border. It was a diabolical journey. So many people died. Some were killed by the bombs, others died of starvation or exhaustion. I was terribly afraid.

One day, I looked at my mother and I saw that she was wearing a chain with a little cross on it.

'What's that, Mummy?' I asked.

She quickly hid her chain. 'Sssh,' she said. 'You must not tell anyone about this.' I never said anything to anyone about it, but I always remembered. Only many years later did I realize that my mother had been a Christian.

When we reached the north of our country, we were given a permit so that we could obtain food each day. During the day we were outside, but at night we were allowed to stay with people and sleep in their homes.

We still had family living in China, my grandma. She regularly came to visit us. One day, she said we should go with her. My mother didn't want to go. 'I'll wait here for Daddy.' So my sister and I

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went with grandma and my mother stayed behind.

The rest of the war, my sister and I lived in China and we didn't see anything of the violence. For the first few years after the war, we stayed in China, where Mao Zedong had by then come to power. He presented a proposal to Kim Il-Sung that a large number of Korean orphans should be educated in China. Our leader agreed to this. My sister and I were among those selected.

So, for a large part of my childhood, I lived away from my mother. Until one day—when I had already been in China for seven years—the order was issued that all North Korean children should return home.

### Care for Widows and Orphans

Once we returned to North Korea, I was able to know my mother a bit better. She never told me she was a Christian, but I had always known that she was different from other people. She took care of widows and orphans, even though we had very little ourselves.

My mother died in 1990, and I became a Christian seven years later. Only then did I realize that my mother had been a Christian all those years. While getting breakfast ready, she was always mumbling something barely audible. Now I know that she was praying. To this day, it's my greatest regret that I was never able to talk to my mother about God. I don't know why she never took me into her confidence. Perhaps it was because I was a chatterbox. I'm not good at keeping secrets. We might have all ended up in a camp if I had opened my big mouth.

So I was brought up as a true Communist. Once I was back in North Korea, I quickly learned that Christian missionaries were trying to infiltrate our nation and make converts. Christians were not capable of 'revolutionary acts' and because of this were considered enemies. Every form of religion, and especially Christianity, was likened to opium: addictive and destructive. I heard stories

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about Christians who went to hospitals, enticed people into cellars, killed them and sucked the blood out of their bodies so that they could sell it. The thought was horrifying to me.

My life centered on Kim Il-Sung. All the food that we received came from him. Now I can laugh about it, but then I saw him not as a man but as a god. He didn't even have to eat or sleep. My mother sometimes tried to tell me something of the truth about Kim Il-Sung, that he was human, but what she said made no sense to me. Sometimes she said strange things like that...

My mother worked in a hospital as a midwife and she encouraged the women there. For example, she often told them things like, 'Heaven is taking care of us.' To me she said, 'Don't misbehave. Heaven is looking down and sees what you're doing. You must always remember this.' She told widows that heaven was taking care of them, too. I think that she was evangelizing, but I never realized it. As far as I know, my mother didn't have a Bible. I never saw one in our house.

In the fifties and sixties, all North Korean citizens were screened and a class division was installed. Three classes were established: the loyal 'core class' consisting of the elite, the 'wavering class', and the 'hostile class'. Any family with Christian roots ended up in the hostile class. My mother's secret faith was not discovered. Because my father had given his life during the Fatherland Liberation War, as we in North Korea called the Korean War, we were assigned to the loyal class.

However, I married a man from the hostile class, a musician from South Korea, who had been made a prisoner of war during the war. After the war, he was not allowed to return to South Korea, but he found work in the north. He was detained while attempting to flee the country and was sent to a camp for two years. When he had completed his sentence, he ended up working in the mines.

I met him and liked him. Actually, I felt sorry for him too. I married him, but the marriage only lasted a few years. One day, he did not return home. The authorities had arrested him and again

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sent him to a camp for political prisoners. I never heard why, but I suspect that they simply did not trust him. I was left behind with two young daughters. From a practical point of view, I was a widow.

In 1970, I married a friend of my husband's. It was very easy to arrange divorce papers. I never heard anymore from my first husband. I suspect that he died in the camp. My second husband and I had another girl and a boy.

We led a fairly good life until famine hit our country at the beginning of the nineties. In 1997, my eldest daughter died. This was the saddest thing that happened in my life. She worked in the salt mines, but had also managed to set up a little business for herself. One day she was robbed and left with no money.

At that time, she was in another part of the country. For a month, she did everything she could to earn enough money to return home. She managed it, but was seriously weakened. All that time, she had eaten hardly anything. She had no strength left.

My husband and I were there when she breathed her last. Her last words were, 'If you want to survive, go to South Korea.'

### “Forgive”

Now, more than fifteen years later, I'm in South Korea and I often recall her words. My other children are here too, but I miss my daughter and my husband. He tried to flee shortly after the death of my daughter. He was supposed to go to China and then try to get to South Korea. After that, we planned to join him.

The first part of the attempt to flee went well. He reached China safely. There were some Christians in China who helped him and told him about God, the Bible and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. My husband told them his life story and so discovered that his family also had Christian roots. During the Korean War, when my husband was seven-years-old, he went to visit his grandfather. Just as he reached the house, he saw some of Kim Il-Sung's soldiers leav-

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ing. This could not be a good sign. He rushed inside. There he saw his grandfather lying on the floor bleeding. He bent over his grandfather, who was trying to say something. He kept repeating one word: 'Forgive'.

And now, so many years later, my husband realized that his grandfather had been a Christian and had been asking God to forgive his murderers. My husband was intrigued by the Christians and began to study the Bible eagerly. Until fate intervened. Someone must have recognized him to be a North Korean and informed the Chinese police. He was arrested and sent back to North Korea, where he was put in prison.

Unfortunately, I was not able to visit him, but my children were. They came back shocked. 'What's going on?' I asked. They showed me what my husband had secretly written on one of their hands. Three words, 'Believe in Jesus'. I was perplexed. Had my husband become a Christian? I knew that he knew some songs from his childhood about a certain 'Jesus', but he didn't know Him before he went to China. Something must have happened in China, but what?

I was never able to ask him, because my husband died after six months in prison. But one day, there was another man standing at the door. He told me that he had been in prison with my husband. In the course of time, a number of other former prisoners came to my house.

They all said the same thing: that my husband had been good to them in prison. He had taken care of them and told them about the gospel. He had revealed that he had come to know Jesus Christ in China and how he had wept and sang for many hours and asked for forgiveness. After I had heard the testimony of these men, I suddenly realized that Kim Il-Sung was not a god. I had lived my whole life on the basis of a lie! I had to get away. I wanted to know the truth.

I began to sell everything I had which was of any value. I travelled to the north and from there tried to reach my Chinese relations by telephone. That didn't work. They'd gone. I met some other people who wanted to escape to China. We decided to go together.

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One night, we hid under a bridge. When there were no soldiers nearby, we walked over the bridge into China. It turned out not to be difficult to get across the border. We reached the other side safely. Then the refugees split up.

I still wanted to try to reach my relatives and went to the address that I had for them. When no one answered the door, I was certain that they were no longer there. I wondered what possibilities I had. I realized that my husband had been helped by Christians. Although I had always been told that Christians were dangerous, because of the testimony of my husband I was no longer afraid.

### Korean Church

Not far from the house of my relatives, I had seen a Korean church. I went there. The people from the church were willing to help me. They took care of me. They explained the whole gospel to me, but to start with, I couldn't understand it at all. Gradually it began to get through to me that there was a God, that He had sent His Son to die for me, and that He cared for me. There is only one explanation as to why I accepted this 'incredible' tale as the truth: my mother and my husband had prayed for me. I'm convinced of this.

I was overwhelmed by God's love. In the years that followed, I studied the Bible and I copied out long portions. One of the Korean churches kept my handwritten Bible. God also gave me a heart for evangelism. I evangelized not only among Koreans, but also among Chinese people. I saved up the money that I earned and with it bought Chinese Bibles, which I gave away.

And thanks to God, one by one my children got out of the country. We made plans to go to South Korea.

At that time, I was staying in a shelter with a number of other North Koreans. One evening after work, two of them went to a bar and got drunk. The police arrested them for disorderliness, and of course, it became apparent that they were illegal immigrants from

North Korea. They were interrogated and the police made them say where they were staying. They gave the address of the shelter.

The next day, the police came round with the intention of arresting all the refugees. There was no one at home—except me. I was taken away. All three of us were deported to North Korea.

The first two days, I was interrogated for hours. The inspectors screamed at me, but fortunately didn't touch me. That was soon to change. The two other North Koreans said that I'd been teaching them about Christianity. Probably they wanted to get off more lightly in this way.

I was taken back to the interrogation room and they screamed at me, 'What were you teaching them?'

I tried to stay calm. 'I wasn't teaching them anything. I only told them about my faith.'

### **“You're walking on water!”**

The guards were merciless. They kicked me and beat me with sticks. I was so discouraged and sad that I even began to doubt the existence of God. How could He allow this? Why did He not intervene?

I was taken back to my cell. There were twelve other people in that hole, but I felt completely alone. All of a sudden, I heard a loud voice. I looked up, but no one was moving or even blinking an eyelid. I was the only one who had heard the voice. Suddenly I heard the voice again.

'My beloved daughter! You're walking on water!' I didn't only hear the voice in my head. It was an audible sound, but the others didn't hear it. And I knew whose voice it was. It was God's voice! He was giving me fresh courage! He hadn't forgotten me! During my imprisonment, I heard the voice again a number of times. Each time, it was God passing on to me a message of encouragement.

God ensured that I wasn't given too severe a punishment. Christians are sometimes killed or locked up for the rest of their lives in

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concentration camps. I was only sentenced for ‘illegally crossing the border’. The judge didn’t take my faith into account because I hadn’t practiced it in North Korea. The punishment imposed was a few years forced labor in a prison camp.

But the issue arose as to whether it would be possible for me to be transferred. After five months in prison, I had become terribly ill. I had various ailments at the same time. My back and throat hurt. The little food that I was given I was unable to keep down, and I had open wounds.

The guards took me to hospital. I heard the doctor talking to the men who had brought me there. He said, ‘She has only three days to live.’

Despite the awful conditions I was living in, I didn’t want to die. I prayed, ‘Dear God, please don’t let me die before I can tell the world about my husband and my country.’

There were seven guards with me in the hospital. They were awful, but I asked God if He would use them to bring about my recovery.

They took me back to the camp. They probably felt a bit sorry for me because I was given a bit more to eat than usual. Some of the prisoners had relatives who occasionally brought them extra food. They were made to share it with me, and miracle of miracles, I was able to keep it down. The days passed. I was still very weak and was only able to stand up by leaning against the wall. At night, I lay on the ice-cold floor. There was no heating in the cell and the cold meant that I could hardly sleep. My hands and feet often felt frozen. We shared our cell with rats and lice. Still, I started to feel better and better. Five months after I had become so ill, I was declared to be better. All that time, I hadn’t taken any medicine. God had answered my prayer. He had kept me alive. During my imprisonment, I was never angry with God. He ensured that nothing got the better of me.

One day, I was taken out of the prison and was driven to a large camp. When I got there, I saw a tall wall with a warning written on it in large letters:

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**Do not try to escape  
You shall be killed**

I was taken to a barracks where fifty women were sleeping on thin mattresses on the floor. The mattresses were pushed up against one another.

If you were to ask me what the worst thing was that I experienced in the camp, I wouldn't be able to tell you. Every day was torture. I often recalled the ten plagues that God poured down on Egypt. Every day it felt as if I was being exposed to all the plagues at the same time.

**“One day, the other prisoners  
will be walking over me”**

Constantly there were people dying. Death was a part of our daily life. The bodies were usually burned and the guards scattered the ashes on the path. Every day, we walked down that path and I always thought, one day the other prisoners will be walking over me.

Every day had the same terrible, monotonous rhythm. At five o'clock we were woken up and the prisoners were counted. At eight o'clock after breakfast, which consisted of two or three spoonfuls of rice, we were marched out of the camp where we had to work in the fields without a break until twelve o'clock. Back in the camp, we were again given a few mouthfuls of food, after which we went back to our work on the land until six o'clock in the evening. In the evenings, we had a criticism session in the camp, during which we had to sit in front of the group and accuse ourselves and others of offenses. After a few more spoonfuls of food, we were then given ideological training. This was the most difficult part of the day. Our eyes fell shut from exhaustion, but we had to pay attention and learn the words of the leaders by heart, otherwise we were punished. After another role call, at ten o'clock, we were finally allowed to go to sleep.

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Despite everything, I remained faithful to God. You must remember this from my story. I remained faithful and God helped me to survive. Even more, He gave me a desire to evangelize among the other prisoners!

But I told God that I was too scared to do so. If I were caught, I would certainly be executed. I wanted to survive this. How could God then ask me to tell others about Him?

Still the desire didn't go away. It became even stronger. He even showed me whom I should approach. I would see one of my fellow prisoners and I would know that I had to explain to that person that there was a God and that He offered salvation to everyone who believed in Him. I told the prisoners what it says in Acts 16:31:

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved— you and our household.

This was such an encouraging message for these people. Not only because of what I said. Every day they were standing on the edge of the abyss. Every day might be their last. The Bible verses that I'd learned by heart gave them hope. They also saw the Spirit at work in me. I stood out among the other prisoners because I helped them. Sometimes I shared some rice with the sick. Occasionally I washed their clothes too.

God used me to lead five people to faith. I tried to teach them what I knew. That may not have been much and I didn't have access to a Bible in the camp. But on Sunday and at Christmas, we met together out of view of the guards. Often, that was in the restroom. There we held a short service. I taught them Bible verses and some songs, which we sang almost inaudibly.

All six of us survived the camp because we took care of one another. Despite our secret meetings, we were never bothered. Except for one time. It was shortly before I was to be released. I'd been given a job that meant I was allowed to work near the gate. I was allowed to work alone, which gave me the chance to sing quietly. I became too enthusiastic and started to sing more and more loudly.

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Suddenly, I saw a guard and immediately stopped singing. He ordered me to come over to him. I did so. I was made to go into the guards' barracks. He was completely wound up and I didn't know how things were going to turn out.

'What were you singing?' he screamed. 'A political song,' I replied.

'You're lying! I heard something else! What were you singing?'

I kept saying that he had misheard and that I had been singing a song with political content. I was allowed to go, but he told me that he would be keeping a closer watch on me. As a punishment, that day I was given no food, a usual punishment for a prisoner who had committed an offense.

The man did as he said he would. Every time I went to the gate, I saw him staring at me. I became afraid and started to pray to God that He would take the guard away from me. One day, I walked to the gate again and saw him rushing out of his barracks to be sick. Shortly afterwards, I heard that he would have to spend at least two months in hospital. I wouldn't be bothered by him again. A few days later, I was released.

### **Finally "re-educated"**

I had never been so happy in my life. I was standing outside the gates that I had been driven in through a few years before. I had seen death and destruction and had almost died myself, but God had taken care of me and now He was allowing me to leave. I had left the camp many times to work on the land, but now I didn't have to return anymore. The state considered me to be 're-educated'.

The electric gates slowly opened. Normally, the prisoners waited until the gates were completely open before they started to move. All the times that I had been marched outside for another day's work, I had always waited. Now I sprinted up as soon as the gates

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were set in motion. I wormed my way through the tiny opening and ran away. I didn't stop running and didn't look back at the camp. I never wanted to see that horrid place again.

I was again allowed to live in a village. Unfortunately, I can't say much about it because I don't want to put the Christians in that village in any danger. But God did great things in my village and people came to faith. For example, there was a woman with breast cancer. The doctors had given her up for lost. I prayed with her, and a month later, the lump was gone.

Another special answer to prayer was when I was out in the fields with a number of people sowing seed. I prayed that God would bless the land. Harvest time came and that plot of land produced a far greater yield than other fields. God had richly blessed the harvest.

## The Promised Land

And still I kept longing for freedom. The last Christmas that I spent in the camp, I had wept terribly. In China, I had often celebrated Christmas in the church, but in the camp it was not possible. Even outside the camp, it was not possible. There is no church building in North Korea where true Christians can meet together. There are only a few show churches in Pyongyang.

I asked God if I might go to the Promised Land. For me, this was South Korea. There was freedom there, and by then, my children were also there. I wanted to be able to meet brothers and sisters in freedom. I was patiently waiting for God to give confirmation.

One day, I was in the woods and I saw the most beautiful rainbow I had ever seen. Only this rainbow was made up of only one color: the brightest white that you can imagine. The rainbow was so close that I could hardly bear to look at it, the light was so bright. I knew this was God's sign. The time was ripe to go to South Korea. God had prepared the way to the Promised Land.

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Through underground networks, my son had let me know that there were people ready at various places along the route to take me to the next point in my journey. He had engaged them to assist me and had paid them. I crossed the border and reported to the first person in the agreed place in China. Two weeks later, through Laos, I had reached Thailand, where I was put on a plane to South Korea. At last I was free.

I immediately fell in love with this country. I still feel as if I'm in my honeymoon period. Of course, there are lots of things wrong here and some people think that South Korea is too materialistic, but what do they know about freedom? For that matter, what does anyone know about freedom? I learned what freedom is in the camp.

### **“I'm living in Psalm 23”**

I may not be as rich as most people here, but I have Jesus in my heart. I'm happy. It feels as if I am living in Psalm 23. This is my favorite Psalm. I meditated on it every day in the camp.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures, He  
leads me beside quiet waters,  
He refreshes my soul.  
He guides me along the right paths for His  
name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I will fear no evil,  
for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff,  
they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the pres-  
ence of my enemies. You anoint my head with*

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*oil; my cup overflows.  
Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house  
of the Lord for ever.*

This Psalm taught me a lot in the camp. I may have been imprisoned in a dark valley, but that didn't matter. The situation in which I find myself doesn't say anything about who Jesus is. He is my Shepherd, and I experienced peace despite the circumstances.

Even though it felt as if I was literally in a valley full of the shadow of death [verse 4 in the King James Version], I wasn't afraid of anything. God comforted me every day. Sometimes even by speaking to me audibly and saying that I was His beloved daughter.

I was in a terrible place, but I knew that God was preparing a table for me. I would experience goodness and love. Perhaps not in this life; perhaps in the next. That didn't matter. I will stay in the house of the Lord forever.”

## The Bible in the Life of Hae-Woo

“If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit,” Jesus says to His disciples in John 15:5. We can see this clearly in the lives of Hae-Woo, her husband and her mother. There were moments in their lives when they invested time and energy in getting to know God by studying His Word and applying it. They remained in Christ. Even when they were no longer able to read the Bible every day and they could not speak openly about Christ. The living water with which God filled them, streamed from inside them and lovingly touched other people.

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.” In Acts 16:31, Paul says these words to a prison guard who is about to commit suicide because he thinks that the

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prisoners have escaped following a violent earthquake. He takes Paul and Silas to his home, where they proclaim the gospel and the guard and his household indeed come to faith. God told Hae-Woo to say the same thing to certain prisoners. He pointed them out, as it were. What did these prisoners have in common with the guard in Acts 16? They had the same question: how can I be saved? With each of us, God brings people on our paths with whom we must enter into a relationship, in whom we must invest. And at a certain point, the question will be posed (perhaps in other words): “How can I be saved?” Then you can say with complete confidence, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” The household too? Not on the basis of the faith of one individual, but on the basis of their own faith. Though Hae-Woo says that she came to faith because her husband and her mother prayed for her. So there is a link. Your faith can bring about faith in someone else.

We could write a whole book about Psalm 23. What is perhaps more interesting for us is to see how Hae-Woo deals with this passage of text. Before she went to the camp, she had learned the Psalm by heart. Every day, she meditated on it. She chewed it over and over, and so came to know the depth of this Psalm. She confronted her reality with the reality of the Bible and concluded that she had to look at the earthly reality in the light of the biblical reality. This is how we must deal with our difficulties and challenges. “I’m not getting on well. I’m struggling with illness, financial difficulties, stress at work, problems in the church...” Does this mean that God is not good? No. On the contrary, it means that we can always turn to Him.

### For Reflection

Do you dare to ask God to lead you to people who need to hear that faith in the Lord Jesus can save them? If you do, ask Him. If not, will you then pray for the courage to ask this of Him?

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### What You Can Do

Pray Psalm 23 regularly for yourself, for believers and non-believers, for Christians in prison and out of prison, and for the whole world (for example, for one country every day). Pray that the Psalm may become our life.

*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down  
one's life for one's friends.*

*Jesus Christ (John 15:13)*



# HAIK AND MEHDI

IRAN

## *The Fire is the Safest Place*

“This is going to be the most difficult foreword I have ever written.” Brother Andrew, the founder of Open Doors, wrote these words in the monthly OD magazine at the beginning of 1994. His previous foreword had ended dramatically with three P.S.’s.

“P.S.: I’ve just heard that Mehdi Dibaj is free! Praise the Lord! There is no other god who can rescue like this.’ (Daniel 3:29b GNT)

P.P.S.: While I was writing this, I heard that on January 19 my friend Haik Hovsepian disappeared without a trace.

P.P.P.S.: At the time of this magazine going to press I received the awful news that Haik has been murdered. What can I say? ‘How painful it is to the Lord when one of His people dies!’ (Psalm 116:15 GNT).”

And now Brother Andrew had to write an article about his Iranian friend Haik, who had been brutally killed. He wrote:

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*“At the end of 1993, I was working in a difficult Muslim country together with the Iranian Church leader, Rev. Haik Hovsepian, training two hundred pastors. Less than two months later, he was murdered. One of the last things he said to me was, ‘Andrew, I will speak out. If they want to make me keep quiet, they will have to kill me.’*

*And speak out is what he did: on behalf of Rev. Mehdi Dibaj, who was to be hung at the end of January. Suddenly he was released, after nine years in prison. At the funeral in Tehran, he said, ‘I should have died, not Haik.’*

*Speak out is what he did: on behalf of the Bible Society, which four years previously had been made to close its doors.*

*Speak out is what he did: on behalf of all the Churches that had been closed down by the authorities.*

*Speak out is what he did, because no one else was doing so. And now I am the one who must speak, at a memorial service in London, where Christian leaders have gathered from all over the world.*

*We are reflecting on the death of a courageous Christian leader who dared to confront the aggressive Muslim world with the cross of Jesus Christ—because he knew the strength of the resurrection and because he knew that*

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*this only came through death! ‘Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.’ Then it does not bear any fruit.*

*With the same message of the cross, he confronted the silent majority of Christians who were too busy surviving to have a plan to win the world for Jesus.*

*But let me tell you: there will be no improvement in any situation whatsoever—moral, spiritual, in the family—if we do not take that cross of Jesus with us and plant it firmly in that situation. This means that there must be believers who, in the midst of conflicts (of which there are enough), dare to proclaim that there is a solution: a royal way, the way of the Kingdom of God.*

*The familiar text from John 3:3, ‘No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again’, has been reduced to an evangelistic message, the way to salvation. But this is not what it is. If we do not become radically different, we will not add a single brick to the building of God’s Kingdom.*

*Haik knew this. He spoke for those who were not able to speak. The ‘cloud of witnesses’ in Hebrews 12:1 had a great gain in Haik. Now, in every situation of conflict, we must plant the cross, from which was heard, ‘It is finished.’ And we will have to die there too—so*

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*that we can live. Otherwise there will be no life for the next generation. This is why I call on you, more urgently than I have ever done, to pray for the Church in the Muslim world.*

*I cannot say it more eloquently than George MacLeod:*

*I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church, I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek ... and at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where He died, and that is what He died about. And that is where Christ's men ought to be, and what Church people ought to be about. Return to the Cross of Golgotha.*

*Let us now, for once, do at Easter what we usually do at New Year: make a resolution, a decision, a choice, a commitment from now on to live for Christ. Then, and only then, will it be true that for me to die is gain.*

*Nothing else can happen to me. I walk through every area of conflict without fear, knowing that God is using me. My presence*

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*alone is my greatest contribution and a blessing there.*

*Religion may dominate in the name of God,  
but never over a man of God.”*

Brother Andrew was speaking about a friend, a brother, and more than that, a man of God, Haik Hovsepien. This is his story. Haik was born on January 6, 1945 in Tehran, married in 1966, and in the course of time, had four children. He was a member of the Pentecostal Church. In 1967, he became the pastor of a church in Majidieh, a suburb of Tehran. Shortly afterwards, he and his wife moved to Gorgan, a town without Christian testimony, and began a house church.

Haik radiated a love for people, especially for Muslims. He was regularly stopped in the street and had the opportunity to pray with non-Christians too. His church grew slowly but surely.

After fourteen years' service in Gorgan, Haik and his family moved back to Tehran, where he first became the leader of the Pentecostal movement and later of all the Protestant churches in Iran. He was particularly loved because of the trips he made all around the country. He did not often speak in large churches, but mainly sought out small churches to encourage the Christians.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the climate deteriorated for Iranian Christians. The churches were forced to keep detailed lists of the people who attended. It was not permitted for church services to be attended by Muslims and services had to be held on Sundays. In Iran, Sunday is a working day, whereas everyone is free on Friday.

Haik courageously opposed these measures. He wrote to the Iranian authorities that he would not submit to such unreasonable requirements.

In 1984, another church leader, Mehdi Dibaj, was arrested. Mehdi was a Muslim convert. In the eyes of the spiritual leaders who

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were in charge in Iran, he was an apostate, an insult to Islam. Despite this, Mehdi did not try to conceal his faith. While many of his relatives were prominent Islamic clerics, Mehdi evangelized. After his conversion in 1950, he worked on Christian radio programs in Farsi. He also helped with the translation of the Bible, children's Bibles, and evangelism material. For two years, he was a missionary in Afghanistan and was eventually deported.

Mehdi's arrest and imprisonment were a great blow to his family. His wife even fell back to Islam and—probably under pressure from family members and the authorities—divorced him. She remarried a Muslim fundamentalist. Mehdi's children, Isa, Joseph, Mary, and Engel, remained faithful to Jesus. They broke off contact from their mother because she had betrayed their Savior and their father.

In the period when Mehdi was in prison, he had hardly any contact with the outside world. At one point, it was as long as two years before his family again received any sign of life from the infamous Evin prison in Tehran. When his son turned seventeen, Mehdi was allowed to send him a letter. In this, he spoke prophetic words:

*Dear Son,*

*Happy birthday! I wish you all the blessings and promises of God! These days, there are so many things to celebrate: the day of the revolution, the birthday of my dear son, my 43rd birthday, the beginning of the eighth year of the testing of my faith in Christ our Lord, and constant victories, one after the other.*

*There is joy and praise in my heart!*

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*I am so thankful to my loving God that He has considered me worthy to be kept here for seven years for my love and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and I thank my Christian brothers and sisters who have supported me with their prayers and their love, so that the victory is for the Lord.*

*The victory is Yours, risen Jesus, Son of the Creator, our Savior.*

*It was Christmas 1985 when one of the guards in the Babol prison asked me, "Does Jesus Christ know that even here there is someone who loves Him?" I told him that Jesus Christ our Lord has millions of people all over the world who love Him and want to give their lives to Him. And that it is my deepest wish that I might become one of them! I do not want to conceal from you that I have always been jealous of the Christians who, in the course of history, were tortured for our Lord Jesus. Because for a Christian, it is a loss if he leaves this world through a natural death. What a privilege it is to be allowed to live for our Lord and also to be able to die for Him!*

*And I am willing not only to stay in prison for the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, but also to sacrifice my life in His service. Because I see life as an opportunity to serve Christ, and death as an even better opportunity to be with Him! Jesus Christ Himself said, "Whoev-*

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*er wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Matthew 16:24-26).*

*"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5) It is the wish of every father and every child to walk together. In the same way God wants us to walk with Him, which means to obey Him.*

*In the park, a child will let go of his father's hand and jump and run around happily. He does not even hear his father calling, "Come on, son, we have to go." But if it were a busy road with dense traffic, that same playful boy would not let go of his father's hand. He would stay close to him, as if they were bound together!*

*Through the account of Daniel's friends in the fiery furnace, God teaches us this important lesson, that when we want to walk close to Jesus the Son of God, we have to enter into the fire because this is the safest place for us! Our socks will not be singed and our clothes will not even smell of smoke!*

*I praise God that in all these seven years, the Lord Jesus has been my strength, so that I not only walk very close to Him in the midst of*

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*the fire, but that I even make some progress!*

*He leads me through water and fire, He leads  
me on the way of the Cross.*

*There may be so much traffic in the street  
and it may be blowing a gale, so that a child  
is afraid to cross the street. His legs are stiff  
with fear. Then he begs his father, "Daddy,  
carry me! Daddy, carry me!" This is the same  
with God. Sometimes the pressure becomes  
so great that it is hardly possible to go on.  
What must a Christian do in a storm like this?  
Does he have any hope of help from God?  
The Lord says, "Call on Me for help in times  
of need. I will save you and you will honor  
Me."*

*What joy it is for a child to be able to sit high  
up on the strong shoulders of his father! From  
that height, he looks down on the time that is  
passing and the bustle of the world. What fun!  
He feels peaceful and happy, like a satisfied  
baby who is sleeping in its father's arms!*

*On the earth, snakes, scorpions, dogs and  
wolves are crushed under the powerful steps  
of his father, and whenever the child is afraid,  
he clings tight to his father. Because "the rod  
and staff" of his father give him courage.*

*Really, it is wonderful to live with God! The  
darker the night, the sooner the dawn comes.  
The darker the clouds, the more abundant*

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*the life-giving rain. The narrower the path, the greater God's limitless help. The greater the sorrow, the greater the comfort of God. However high the waves on the sea are, they can never disturb the peace in the depths. However much the storm rages, it cannot move the mountain. Those who trust in the Lord are like mountains that are not shaken.*

*In love, Jacob waited for seven years for Rachel, in order to be able to marry her. He loved Rachel so much that seven years of hard work and deprivation were like a few days to him!*

*And you, my son, beloved of the Lord, does it sometimes happen that you cry all night, but overflow with joy when the day dawns? Very soon, we will see the fruit of our labor in this life. Then we will be satisfied and full of joy. This is our hope, the blessed hope that Christ is coming and will lead us to the source of life. Then He will lead me everywhere, and I will walk with Him, every day...*

*Once a Christian was asked, "What will you do if oppression and deprivation come?" He replied, "I'll greet the difficulties with joy as you greet a good friend, because I long for Christ to be able to give me strength in everything."*

Less than a year after Mehdi wrote this letter, the judge pronounced the death sentence on him. The sentence could be carried out at any moment. The Iranian Church was again in danger of los-

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ing an important figurehead. Some time previously, the pastor Hossein Soodmand had been executed in one of the numerous prisons with which Iraq is endowed. He had left behind a blind wife and four children.

Mehdi might have had peace about the prospect of soon meeting his Maker, but Haik was not happy about it. As the leader of the Protestant churches and as a brother and friend of Mehdi, he could not just let this go. He protested publically against the forthcoming execution of Mehdi. Through a worker in the prison, Haik got hold of a copy of the verdict. This was crucial proof and he wrote to government leaders in other countries.

“Haik, do you know what you’re doing?” a friend asked him.

Haik knew very well. He had set a train of events in motion, which could no longer be stopped and which would probably lead to his death.

“Haik,” the friend still tried, “think of your family. You have four children.”

“Mehdi has four children too,” Haik replied. This was the end of the discussion. He was willing to die, not because he was silent, but because he spoke out. So he made the ordeals of the Iranian Church known around the world. Mehdi and Haik were suddenly in the spotlight.

The efforts of Haik quickly produced a result. An international storm of protest arose and the Iranian government was put under severe pressure. They had no choice but to release Mehdi. On January 17, 1994, Mehdi walked out of the prison. A service of thanksgiving was held in a church. When Mehdi walked in, jubilant singing broke out. The Christians sang the song, *In the Name of Jesus, We Have the Victory*.

“This was the best reception we could give our hero,” Haik said about the meeting.

Mehdi said that the judge had been kind to him. “Even judges sometimes make mistakes in their judgments,” the judge had said. Mehdi did not have to pay bail, but he did have to remain available

for further questioning. New accusations had been made: spying for the West and offensive remarks about the former Ayatollah Khomeini.

### **“Goodnight, Dad”**

The celebratory mood did not last long, says Gilbert Hovsepian, one of Haik’s sons. “I still remember going to bed on January 19 [two days after the release of Mehdi]. My father was at home and I said, ‘Goodnight, Dad.’ He said, ‘Sleep well, son.’ It was the last time I saw him.”

Haik left early the next morning, but never came home again. No one had seen him; no one had heard from him. “Those were awful days,” says Haik’s wife Takoosh. “Something had happened. That was clear. But what? We didn’t know. Whenever I heard a noise in the house, I thought it was Haik coming in.”

The uncertainty went on for twelve days. Then Joseph, the eldest son of Haik and Takoosh, received a phone call from the police. “I had to go to the police station. I was requested to go as the ‘man of the house.’ Women do not count in our country. I hoped to hear that they knew where my father was, but I was also afraid that they would say that he was dead. Going there, my legs felt like lead.”

When he reached the police station, Joseph was shown a file containing horrifying photos of mutilated corpses. Joseph leafed through the file and was able to say of each photo, “No, that’s not my father.”

Relieved, Joseph finally closed the file. It did not contain a photo of his father. There was still hope.

“Before you go, we have to show you one more photo,” said the officer and he put a photo on the desk. The photo showed the bare, battered, bloodstained body of a man.

To start with, Joseph only recognized the eyes. “They were the eyes that, all my life, had looked at me so lovingly.”

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As Joseph was returning home, he could only think of one thing. How could he tell the family that Daddy would never be coming home again? He was particularly concerned about André, his ten-year-old brother. Would he understand? He no longer had a father.

André understood. He says, “When Joseph came in, he didn’t have to say anything. We could see from his face that we’d lost Dad. We weren’t even able to give him a funeral because he was already buried in an Islamic cemetery.”

The Church submitted a protest against this. After a tip-off by a worker at the cemetery, they discovered where Haik had been buried. They were granted permission to exhume the body and bury it elsewhere. Only then did the Christians see how badly Haik had been beaten. He had been stabbed twelve times. Many of the stabs wounds reached to his heart.

This is why a friend of Haik’s says, “Haik gave his heart twice. First when he came to faith and dedicated his life to Jesus Christ, and a second time when he died.”

Many people from around the country and abroad came to the memorial service. Among them were also Muslims. Everyone was shocked by the death of Haik, which on the one hand was predictable, but on the other had been completely unexpected and sudden.

Mehdi Dibaj was among the scores of mourners. He was handed the microphone. Of course, he had to say something, but what did he have to say? Barely two weeks before, the joy had been so great. He had expected to die alone on a gallows somewhere in Iran. Instead, there had been a meeting to thank God and he had again been able to hold his family and friends in his arms. He considered himself dead, but he had returned to life again. And now the man who had ventured his own life for Mehdi was no longer there.

**“Haik died in my place”**

The voice of Mehdi became shriller and shriller as he forced out the words: “When Jesus was hanging on the Cross, there was only one person on the earth who knew that Jesus was dying in his place, and that was Barabbas. If there is now one person in the world who knows that Haik died in his place, it is me.”

There was also a memorial service for Haik in England. The founder of Open Doors, Brother Andrew, spoke during the service. “Again a seed has fallen to the ground and died. This is how it should be. Haik realized this. A seed cannot germinate if it does not first die.”

Brother Andrew was speaking prophetic words. The Iranian Christians had never been so united as they were after the death of Haik. The brutal murder marked a turning point in the history of the Iranian Church. There is the period before Haik’s death and the period after it. Haik’s wife, Takoosh, was perhaps one of the first to realize this. Suddenly she started to receive letters, particularly from Christians from a Muslim background. They were thanking God for the life of Haik and what he had meant to them. They also said, “Do not be discouraged. Do not worry about us. We are willing to die!”

Takoosh also received thousands of letters and cards from abroad. This gave her the feeling that she was not alone. She was fighting a battle with herself and with God. “I am thankful for what God taught me after the death of my husband. It was as if I suddenly went from the spiritual kindergarten to the Christian university. God was urging me to forgive the murderers, but I was not able to. I didn’t want to.”

And still ... she wanted to be obedient. She listened to what God had to tell her. “I constantly had to take another step. First I had to not be angry. I prayed a lot for this and the door opened and the anger left. Then God asked me to forgive the murderers. How difficult this was! By then, I did want to, but I was not able to.

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This is what I told God, and slowly my heart began to change and I reached the point where I can sincerely say that I have forgiven the people who killed my husband.”

The cards helped in this process. “Every card took away some of my pain. Still forgiveness remains an ongoing process. There are days when I miss Haik so much that the anger again wells up. At those moments, I again have to make the decision to forgive.”

Iranian Christians did not expect the Church to grow so much after this event. “I thought that no one would come anymore, but the opposite proved to be true. Shortly after the death of my husband, a number of Muslims were converted in a miraculous way. Dreams played an important part in these conversions.”

Her son André gives an example. “There was a Muslim who had never heard about Jesus. In a dream, he saw a man come up and walk along beside him. It was my father. As they went along, they came to a broad, attractive gate, and a small, narrow one. The man went through the broad one, and my father through the narrow one. When the Muslim asked why he did not take the attractive gate, my father explained that you will get on better through the narrow gate because Jesus is there. A little while later, the man was at the cemetery and saw my father’s photo. This is how this man came to repent.”

## The Girl in White Clothes

The children had a hard time, too. Gilbert was seventeen when he wished his father “goodnight” for the last time. Naturally, he experienced great grief. One day, he was to play the piano at church. While he was practicing before the service began, a young girl in white clothes came up to him. She looked as if she was not more than about ten years old. She asked, “Gilbert, do you have a father?”

Gilbert looked at her sorrowfully. “Haven’t you heard? I don’t

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have a father. Not anymore.”

The girl went away, but came back again a few minutes later. “Gilbert,” she said again, “do you have a father?”

Gilbert shook his head. “I don’t have a father.”

Again the girl left Gilbert alone for a moment, only to come back again and stand next to Gilbert.

“Do you have a father, Gilbert?”

Now Gilbert became cross. Who did the child think she was? How silly could she be to ask him the same question three times?

“I do not have a father,” he snarled.

The girl looked at him and then said, “Gilbert, you do have a father.” She turned around and walked away. During the church service, Gilbert tried to see her, but she seemed not to be there. “We never saw her again,” says Takoosh. “We are certain that this girl was an angel from God. At that moment, God let us know that He is our Father and that He cares for us. He did that when Haik was still alive and He did it after Haik died too. A wonderful encouragement for us as a family.”

## Mehdi Had to Die Too

The first six months after Haik’s death seemed to pass quietly, but certainly not without tension for the Church. After Haik’s murder, everyone braced themselves. Who would be the next victim? The lot fell to Mehdi. Iran did not want to try again to punish him through legal proceedings. At the same time, the government had suffered a considerable loss of face in its own country. This had to be made right. Mehdi had to die too.

He did not die on the gallows in a prison, but instead like Haik, probably surrounded by men who stabbed him with knives. Did he feel lonely at that moment? What was he thinking about? We do not know. We only know the words that he spoke before he was abducted and killed. “When we were young with our fiancées, it was

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not important where we were, but that we were together. The same is true of our Lord.

He has promised, 'I am with you, to the ends of the earth.' The best time of my life was in prison, because He was very close. When the Lord is with me, the prison is heaven and paradise. I no longer had any responsibilities and could read His words day and night. When I woke up at night, I knelt down under the blankets. What a wonderful time I then had and what wonderful revelations I had about the secrets of God. So I thank God for everything I experienced. Wherever the Lord is with us, it is paradise."

Stephen, the first martyr of the Church, never experienced the presence of Jesus so strongly as while he was being stoned. He even saw Him sitting at the right hand of God. I am convinced that this applied to Haik and Mehdi too, that the Lord was with them despite the pain they had to bear in their bodies. In the words of Haik, they passed "from one room to the next".

## The Courageous Church

The deaths of Soodmand, Haik and Mehdi, and later also the pastors Tateos Mikaelian and Mohammad Bagher Yusefi, meant that the Church in Iran became a courageous Church. Some years after their deaths, staff of Open Doors were talking with a brother Hakim, an Iranian evangelist. Already, he had regularly been detained for questioning by the police.

This did not put him off. "You can do three things to us," he said during such an interrogation. "You can confiscate our churches, but the real Church is not a building. Our leaders have already decided to invest less in buildings anyway. So if you want to confiscate our churches, we will not try to stop you. The real Church will continue to exist, even without buildings.

You can arrest us and put us in prison, but as you know, this does not achieve the desired result. The imprisonment and death

sentence of Mehdi Dibaj made the Iranian Church known around the world. As Mehdi once said himself, 'A Christian is just like a bouncy ball. The harder you hit him, the higher he goes.' This certainly applied to him.

Finally, you can kill us. You have done this to five of our brothers, but the death of these martyrs has only resulted in a huge growth in the Church. The prospect of dying as a martyr does not put me off!"

Hakim is only one of the many examples of Christians in Iran who have gone to the extreme to serve God with their lives. Still, many Christians are being imprisoned each year for shorter or longer periods of time. In prison, they have to endure physical and mental torture.

Still, there is one thing the government and the appointed guards cannot achieve: they cannot keep God out of the prisons. He is always popping up and demonstrating His greatness.

There was a Christian named Hamideh who was attending a Bible course outside of Iran. Hamideh wanted to get out of Iran for good. She was going to apply for asylum in England, but during the Bible course, she began to read the Bible in a different way. Suddenly, she became convinced that she was not to leave. She had to go back to her country to serve the Lord there. The woman tore up her ticket to England and returned to Iran.

It was not long before Hamideh was arrested during a church service. This caused her some confusion. Had God called her back for this? To go straight to prison? Had she not prayed about whether she should or should not go to the service? She had the clear conviction that God wanted her to meet other Christians.

But in prison, Hamideh discovered why God had allowed this to happen to her. By mistake, the guards put her in the same cell as Amira. Amira was a prisoner who, for months, was told day in and day out that she had been forgotten by the outside world and that she would die alone. She had begun to believe it.. Hamideh immediately realized who Amira was. After all, so many prayers had been

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said for her in the churches.

Cautiously, Hamideh established contact with Amira and told her how the Church was standing with her in prayer.

“Really?” asked an incredulous Amira. “I thought that everyone had forgotten me! Praise the Lord that He sent you to me.”

It was a wonderful meeting. Amira and Hamideh learned in prison that it is impossible for walls and bars to keep God out. Hamideh was soon released, while Amira received the strength to persevere. Just like Haik, Mehdi and many others, they learned to put their hope in Christ.

The families of Haik, Mehdi and the other martyrs have learned this, even though they still miss their loved ones just as much. They know that they will see them again. This is seen clearly in Gilbert’s closing remark: “The last thing I said to my father was ‘Goodnight, Dad.’ So my first words when I see him again will be, ‘Good morning, Dad.’”

### **The Bible in the Lives of Mehdi and Haik**

Brother Andrew said at the memorial service for Haik that the kernel of wheat must first die before it can bear fruit. He was quoting Jesus (John 12:24). Brother Andrew realized that Haik gave his life for Christ more than once. Because, as Jesus explains in John 12, we must not love our lives (verse 25). We must even lay our lives down and no longer focus on ourselves. Haik, Mehdi and the other pastors who died knew very well the risk they were taking. Or rather, they knew what the cost of obedience was. In verse 26, Jesus says, “Whoever serves Me must follow Me; and where I am, My servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves Me.” There is no doubt about it. If we lay our lives down (literally or figuratively; Haik and Mehdi did both), Jesus is there. He does not walk behind us; we follow Him. This is why Haik and Mehdi spoke out, full of trust.

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“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”, Jesus says in John 15:13. Haik sacrificed his life for Mehdi. Mehdi might have done likewise, but primarily they gave their lives for another friend. Because Jesus says in John 15:14, “You are My friends if you do what I command.” Haik and Mehdi primarily wanted to obey their Master. They realized all too well that compared with the sacrifice that Christ made, their sacrifices were nothing. This did not mean that they did not suffer pain. On the contrary. And this was perhaps even more the case for their surviving relatives. But Haik and Mehdi knew Jesus as a faithful friend who would not abandon their families.

“When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.” (Isaiah 43:2) The books of the prophets are often difficult for us to get through, but in precisely these Scriptures, God reveals His heart for people. They give great insight into God’s feelings.

In Isaiah 43, He addresses His people by name: “But now, this is what the Lord says—He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.’ God does not only address Israel, but all people Who belong to Him. And this is why Haik and Mehdi could say with so much trust: the fire is the safest place for us. Why? Because when you are surrounded by fire, you can only look up for salvation. Anything that is not really important in life no longer counts. And God promises that He is there, that the fire shall not consume us.

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### For Reflection

If you were to lay down your life for God every day, what would it be like? What effect would this have on you and those around you?

### What You Can Do

Haik's sons have made a striking documentary about the death of their father. This DVD, entitled *A Cry from Iran* (available from the Open Doors web shop) is worth watching. It will certainly help you to empathize more with persecuted Christians.

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

*Jesus Christ (John 10:10)*



# ACHMED

## EGYPT

### *Achmed's Choices*

Life consists of a series of decisions. Some are life changing; others are of less consequence. Persecuted Christians, just like us, have to make decisions every day, but the consequences of these decisions are sometimes far-reaching. “What would I do in his place?” I often ask myself this question, particularly when I meet someone whose story has not yet been “completed”, who is still in the midst of oppression.

Take Achmed from Egypt. His story shows how many decisions he was required to make. With many of these decisions, it was not clear what was “right” or “wrong”.

Imagine that you, like Achmed, are an Egyptian Christian from a Muslim background, and you are faced with the following dilemmas. What decisions would you make?

You want to know more about Jesus, but you do not dare to talk about Him. What do you do? Do you secretly read the Bible, or do you secretly go to another village on Sunday mornings to at-

tend to Church? You decide to tell you wife or your husband about your new faith. She/ He is upset and immediately goes to the imam. What do you do? Do you go into hiding at the home of a good friend because you realize that you are at great risk, or do you wait and see?

Your spouse remains married to you, but for the first months, she is aggressive. Then she gradually becomes curious about your faith. What do you do? Do you explain the gospel to her, or do you doubt her sincerity and remain superficial?

Achmed had to make these and other decisions. The local imams invited him for a reconciliatory talk. A trap or an opportunity to tell the gospel? The threats increased. Continue to be salt and light, or flee? The Bible is not an instruction book that tells us day by day exactly what we must do. Sometimes Christians remain despite the persecution; sometimes they leave. Is there a right and a wrong response?

Let me take you into Achmed's world to see how he dealt with this and other decisions.

## **A Christian in the House**

“Daddy, why do you allow that Christian into our house?” Nine-year-old Achmed pointed at the carpenter who was repairing their house. He could not comprehend why his father was having this important work done by a Christian. Achmed had heard so much at school about Christians. Their “Book” was falsified. They were not the equals of Muslims. They were inferior. And now his father was allowing a man like that into the house. It had to be admitted that the Christian man was always cheerful and polite. Perhaps even kind. But still. He was a Christian, an unclean man, an enemy of Islam, someone who was and ought to be subordinate.

Achmed's father sighed and looked at his son. “The carpenter is a believing and kindly man.” He left it at that and Ahmed knew

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it was better not to ask any more. After all, if his father thought the carpenter was a nice man, Achmed could find him nice too, could he not? Yes, in the future, he would hate all Christians except the carpenter. And yet ... that did not seem quite right.

Achmed continued to struggle with this throughout his childhood. There was nothing he wanted more than to be a good Muslim. The fact that he liked a Christian was a sign of weakness. The truth had to sink more deeply into him. He was convinced of this. From the age of thirteen, he began to learn the Koran by heart. [For comparison, the Koran is slightly longer than the New Testament.] He did not find in the holy book of the Muslims the rest and peace that he longed for so much. At the same time, Christianity continued to intrigue him, and also the question of who Allah actually was. He went to the imams and put his questions to them. They sent him away. He was too young, just a child. What was the point of posing these difficult questions?

There was only one person Achmed could turn to: he prayed to Allah. Still he received no answer.

Achmed became an increasingly fanatic Muslim. He hoped to find answers to his questions by making an effort in his faith. He wanted to convert Christians and even moderate Muslims to a stricter form of Islam. So when he was eighteen, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood, which was then an underground movement. He travelled around the country recruiting Muslim clerics for the Brotherhood. It was not long before the leaders saw how fanatic Achmed was and how much talent he had. He was allowed to become an imam and to establish a Koran school for children.

The work was unpaid, and Achmed also had a job at another school. At this school, there was a Christian working as well. The man did not draw attention to himself, but the bullying by Islamic colleagues was obvious.

“You’re going to hell,” they snapped at the Christian.

Achmed had an inner conflict. He considered it his duty to persecute Christians, but at the same time, he could no longer stand

the injustice. He went up to the Muslim teachers and said, "A Muslim shouldn't say that! The holy Koran forbids us to judge others. Whether someone is going to paradise or to hell depends on Allah and on Allah alone!"

Clearly shocked by this vehement response by Achmed, the other Muslims slunk away.

"Thank you," said the Christian.

"Don't mention it," replied Achmed. "How do you put up with being bullied like that at this school? Why don't you just become a Muslim? Then you'd be rid of all the problems."

The man smiled. "I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"The Bible says, 'What does it profit a man to gain the whole world if he loses his life?'"

This was new. A Christian who had a response? Would this man perhaps dare to tell him more about his faith? It was a moment before Achmed could think of what to say next.

"What do you mean by that?" Achmed asked.

"I can explain it to you, but it'll take some time."

"I have time."

"Come on then, let's go outside."

Achmed followed the man to a quiet place and they sat down. In the hours that followed, the man explained to Achmed who Jesus was, why He had come and what He had done for people like Achmed.

"I'd like to read that for myself," Achmed finally said.

"Come home with me," replied his colleague. When they got there, Achmed was given a Bible. That same evening, he started to read Matthew. He did not have to hide the Bible from his wife. She could not read anyway. God's words in the first book of the New Testament immediately did something to Achmed. For the first time that he could remember, he began to feel a huge amount of peace. In particular, the story about the centurion who believed that Jesus could heal at a distance touched him deeply. That faith

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and that trust was what Achmed was looking for.

### Going to Church in Secret

A year had passed. By now, through his Christian colleague, Achmed had met various other Christians. He had started a correspondence course and regularly went to church on Sundays. In another village of course. Apart from a small group of Christians, no one knew about his interest in the Christian faith, not even his wife. It was an advantage that she could not read. This meant that she did not see that he was studying the Bible instead of the Koran.

Within Achmed a conflict was raging between the Allah, about whom he was still teaching people on Fridays as an imam, and the Christian God he heard about on Sundays in the church.

Achmed was still not convinced that the Christian God was the true God. How could he make a decision?

Friends invited him to a Christian conference. He decided to go. When he got to the church where the meeting was being held, he went and sat at the back. Carefully, he looked around to see if there were any familiar faces. The coast seemed to be clear. He could concentrate on the sermon. The minister walked down the aisle and everyone stood up. The man turned round.

“Welcome, beloved children of God.”

The sounds around Achmed seemed to be muffled. He completely missed the rest of the words of the minister. These first words had hit the mark deep in his soul. A God who loved? Did such a God exist? He did not know whether he had heard the message of a loving God before. But now for the first time, it got through to him. At the end of the day, Achmed drove back to his village, still full of awe for the loving God. He could not get around it anymore. Christ had knocked on the door of his heart and Achmed had opened it out of curiosity. And now he felt the love of his heavenly Father. It was overwhelming. This was more

forceful than being in love. The God who had created heaven and earth, from the smallest single-celled organism to the largest whale, knew Achmed personally.

Greater still, the Allah who Achmed had always thought was a severe judge did not exist. Instead, there was a God who cared about Achmed. So much so, that He had allowed His Son to die in Achmed's place. And He had not only died in Achmed's place, but in the place of everyone who believes in Him.

Achmed could not keep this to himself. As soon as he got home, he went to his wife Hafsah and told her about his new love: Jesus Christ. Her response was not what Achmed had expected.

She had always been a good wife, respectful to Achmed and seldom disobedient. If she did not do what he said, a slap was usually enough to get her in line again.

Now she did not respond submissively. Achmed saw panic in Hafsah's eyes. She tried to get past him to the door. "Where are you going?" called Achmed.

"To the imam. You've gone mad!"

Thoughts stacked up. At the end of every sentence there was a question mark and an exclamation point.

Had he misunderstood God? Why did Hafsah not respond with greater patience? What should he do? She was going to tell the imam. Tomorrow the whole village would know that the imam Achmed had become a Christian.

For a year, he had kept his interest in the Christian faith a secret. Was this the moment to run away? But he was married and he loved his wife and children. Surely he could not abandon them? Jesus would not approve of that. So what should he do? Just wait and see?

The door opened and a fellow imam came in. "Is it true, brother Achmed? Hafsah tells me that you have acquired some strange thinking," he said.

"I've become a Christian," replied Achmed.

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### Pilgrimage to Mecca

Six months had passed. The conversation with the imam had been one of many. Everyone seemed to be trying to reconvert Achmed. But that was not the worst. Achmed, eloquent as he was, could wave aside all the arguments for Islam. Inevitably, he lost his job as an imam and he had of course given up his membership to the Muslim Brotherhood. The “brothers” were not pleased about this betrayal by one of their members. “Why don’t you go on pilgrimage to Mecca?” they suggested. “We’ll pay for you and then Allah will excuse you for all your guilt.”

Achmed knew better. The Brotherhood had many contacts in Saudi Arabia. The religious police would certainly know how to deal with a Muslim who said he had converted to Christianity. Achmed declined the offer.

The pressure from the community was not the hardest thing for Achmed. No, coming home was much more difficult. Hafsah seemed to have lost her respect for him. She even shouted at him. To start with, he saw fear in her eyes when she was doing this. She was afraid of being hit, but the hitting was a thing of the past. This was no longer part of him. Achmed wanted to show that he had changed, and began to help around the house. He enjoyed the attention of his children. They gave him greater pleasure than before. And soon, even Hafsah seemed to be becoming more tender.

Suddenly, Hafsah was standing in front of him. “Nowadays you’re so different.”

“Do you think so?” asked Achmed.

“Yes. I’m glad you no longer beat me. But why is that?”

“The Bible says that when a man and woman are married, they become one. If I hit you, I hurt myself too. Why would I do that?”

Hafsah sat down and asked Achmed some questions about the Christian faith. He patiently gave simple answers in a calm tone. For the first time, she seemed to be sincerely interested in the Christian faith. At the end of the evening, he asked her, “Do you

want to follow Christ too?” She nodded. Achmed was overjoyed. For months it had been extremely trying for him to come home knowing that Hafsah would make life bitter for him. This time was over. But while Achmed and his wife were deciding to follow Jesus together, the local spiritual leaders were discussing new plans to make Achmed reconvert.

### **“I don’t have any strength in myself”**

This is the extent of Achmed’s story when I meet him for the first time. When he comes into the building where I am waiting for him, he staggers more than he walks. This is the result of the polio that Achmed had as a child. I am here in the Egyptian capital of Cairo to interview Christians for our campaign “Secret believers”, which is about Christians in the Muslim world, and especially about those who cannot come out for their faith.

Achmed is one of these secret believers. He is here not primarily to be interviewed. He is also looking for a hiding place, for work and for a new school for his children. It is now six months since his wife came to faith. Since then, the pressure has only increased. How has Achmed kept going? “I don’t have any strength in myself. It has been God’s work from beginning to end. When I’m shouted at in my village, I don’t say anything. I’m convinced that this is the right path to take.”

### **The Language of Blood**

The patience of Achmed’s village with the Christian family in their midst has been exhausted. “They want me to go to the mosque so that they can make an example of me as an impure Muslim. I have to publically deny faith in Jesus Christ.”

To go to the mosque: an opportunity to tell the gospel or a

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trap? “A trap,” says Achmed without any doubt. “Still, it’s a tempting choice to go to the mosque. I could simply return to Islam. Then all my problems would be solved. As a Muslim, I’d have a good and easy life, but what good does it do if you dispense with the truth?”

No, Achmed would prefer to give everything up. “I’ve refused. Of course I’ve refused. Now the extremists are threatening to take my wife and children from me. We have to leave the village, but how can I ensure that they do not find us?”

Open Doors is helping Achmed and his family to settle in a big city. Simply moving houses is not an option. There is one great problem. “If I want to send my children to another school, the new school requires the transfer of papers from the old school. In other words, the old school will know exactly which school I’m having my children attend. This makes it very simple to track us down.”

Achmed looks at his watch. He has to go back to his family, back to his village. “Ask the people in the West for prayer,” he says. “The extremists want to kill me. They only know the language of blood. They will certainly pursue me. I have only one dream for this life: that my family and I might have a safe place to live. Please pray that God will provide a solution.”

A few months after returning to the Netherlands, I ask my colleagues to contact Achmed and ask him how he is getting on. Is he now living in a city in Egypt? The answer that Achmed sends back is as short as it is surprising:

“I’ve decided to stay as light and salt for my village.”

## Looking for a New Family

A year after my first meeting with Achmed, I return to Egypt. Of course, he is at the top of my list of people I want to talk to again. And fortunately, he is able to come and see me. He is even in Cairo.

Just like last year, he makes a rather nervous impression. He turns off his mobile phone and even takes the battery out. “We’ve

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had people listening in on conversations while everyone had their mobile phones turned off. It seems that the secret service can even listen in when your telephone is switched off.”

I do not know if this is true, but if it is going to reassure Achmed, I take my phone apart too. At the start of the conversation, I tell him how much people in the West have been praying for him. He is embarrassed and looks down at the floor, but he cannot suppress a smile.

During the conversation, he nods his head a lot, laughs often, and patiently answers all the questions. He wants to tell his story.

“I’m looking for a new family,” he says. It is a different Achmed who is facing me. The Achmed of last year was tense and frustrated. He was in Cairo looking for a school for his children—a Christian school which would not betray the fact that he had fled. It seemed to be working out—until he decided himself not to flee.

*Why did you stay in your village in the end?*

“I wanted to be salt and light there. I wanted to serve the Lord there. Another reason was that I wouldn’t be safe in Cairo either. The fundamentalists in my village would call their friends in Cairo in order to find me. Then they’d take us back to my village and I don’t want to think about what would happen after that.”

*Everyone knows you are a Christian. What is your life like?*

“It was a difficult decision. I decided to go to the mosque again on Fridays and to act like a Muslim.”

*Why?*

“Because we’re under great pressure, especially from my wife’s family. My brother-in-law told my wife that she had to become a Muslim again. Otherwise they would murder me and take our children from her. What choice did I have? I discussed it with various other Christians and asked for advice. They think this decision is acceptable. I do too, even though I find it difficult. On the outside, I’m a Muslim, but I pray to the Lord Jesus. He’s my Redeemer and it’s Him I follow.”

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*How is your wife dealing with this?*

“She knows very little about the Christian faith. She can’t read or write. When we pray together, we pray to Christ, but I use Islamic words. That’s what she understands. When one of our children is ill, she asks me to ask the Lord Jesus to make him or her better. But she does wear the veil, just like the other women in our village. She goes to the mosque.”

*And to whom does she then pray?*

“To Jesus Christ. When she has sinned, she asks Him for forgiveness.”

*At the moment you’re staying in an Open Doors relief centre. Why?*

“I’m only there during the week. At the weekends, I’m at home with my family. My job also has an office in Cairo and I applied for a transfer here. I can tell my family that I’m obliged to come here. The real reason is that I’m looking for the Body of Christ, that is, for a new family. I’m looking for Christians who want to fight with me for the gospel. But it’s very difficult to live here without my family. I couldn’t bring my wife and children with me because the village would then immediately realize that we’d run away.”

*Have you found what you were looking for?*

“To be honest, no. Many of the Christians I’ve met in Cairo are too worldly. They don’t take any risks. If they were to do so, Egypt would look very different. I’m quite disappointed. Not by God. No, the Lord is faithful. I enjoy every moment with Him, even if I’m alone.”

*Do you have Christian friends with whom you can share things?*

“Yes, we have formed a small group. That’s a great blessing.”

*Are you going to stay in Cairo?*

“No, I’m soon going to settle in my village again. I don’t have the freedom to be a Christian in Cairo either. So I’d rather be in my village with my family.”

*If it’s so difficult for you to go to church and you don’t have a Bible study group, how do you learn to understand the Bible better?*

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“Thanks to God, I understand much of the Bible. It’s true that I need a lot of teaching, particularly because I sometimes preach in churches.”

*How can a secret believer such as you preach in a church in Egypt?*

“That isn’t simple. I’m invited by Christians who know friends of mine. I only accept invitations in villages far from my own village, where people don’t know me. And I only go there once. If they invite me to come back again, I refuse. The chance that the secret police will track me down is then much too great.”

*What do you speak about? About your life as a secret believer?*

“I don’t speak about my life as a secret believer. I don’t want people to be able to find out who I am, where I live, or who my family is.

But from my occasional use of Islamic language, they understand that I used to be a Muslim. Usually I speak about the role of the Holy Spirit in your life, based on 1 Corinthians 3:1-3: ‘I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly— mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly.’ I want people really to come to faith, for them to dedicate themselves heart and soul to the gospel of Jesus Christ, for them to daily take up their cross and follow Him.”

*What is the most difficult thing in your life?*

“My lack of freedom of movement. I would like so much to testify about Christ, but I have the feeling that I’m in chains. I can’t say what I think or feel. I can’t be who I am.”

*If you were not married, would you then take greater risks?*

“Certainly! I feel responsible for my wife and children. If it were only about me, I would be much more open, but I don’t want anything to happen to them. My children don’t know that their parents are Christians.”

*Are they being given an Islamic education?*

“Yes... They go to a madrasa, a Koran school. The family insists

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on it, especially their granddad, my wife's father. I want to tell them about the Lord Jesus, but it isn't possible. They're too young. If we explain to them about the true God and the sacrifice that He made, they'll tell other people and we'll get into great difficulties. I hope that I'll be able to tell them about Christ later on."

*So now you can't do anything more than be a good father?*

"Indeed. They've noticed that. Since my conversion to Christianity, I love them much more, and they love me too. I have to be patient until I can tell them about the faith."

*Do you have peace about this?*

"No, not really. My children are my greatest concern. It's my conviction that if they were to die now, they would go to heaven. But what about when they're older? What if they then decide not to follow Christ but Allah? This thought rips me apart."

*If there were one lesson you could teach Christians from your life, what would it be?*

"That Christ can replace every heart of stone with a heart of flesh and blood. I'm a living example for this. The text from John 10:10 is my favorite saying, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' This is what it's about: Christ who finds us and gives us life. And not just life, but life to the fullest. If He changes us from the inside, the fruits become visible in our lives. The deeds of one person which are seen by thousands of people have more effect than the words of thousands of people on one person."

*What would you like us to pray for?*

"Pray for my children, that they'll come to faith. Pray for my wife that she'll persevere in faith. Her faith is still very shaky. She can't read the Bible and she doesn't know any Christian women. Please pray that I can be a witness to Christ—an open witness, not a silent witness."

I pray for Achmed. I ask the Creator of heaven and earth to perform a miracle in Achmed's children, so that they can now already come to faith without the intervention of Achmed or others. I pray

that Achmed's wife will experience spiritual growth and that the paralyzing fear of her family will disappear. I also ask God to use Achmed and to show His plan to him. I pray that Achmed's whole life may point to Jesus and the cross.

Achmed gets up and thanks the Christians in the West profusely for their love and prayers. "God is good. He takes care of us," he says.

Upon leaving the church, he sees the police standing there. "What should I say if they ask for my identity papers?" he asks my translator.

"That you're here for your work," is the reply.

Achmed nods and leaves. This is the last time I see him. After another year and a half, I ask my Egyptian colleagues how he is getting on. It appears that he had to leave Egypt after all. Achmed and his family are now living in Europe. We have no contact with them. I hope they are getting on all right.

Many Christians from a Muslim background see the West as paradise on earth. They are not aware of the almost endless asylum procedures that they land in as refugees. And they do not know that they will be put in the same camps as many Muslim extremists, which can be a source of great pressure.

There is one thing I am certain of: Achmed and his wife have finally been able to tell their children about Jesus Christ and His voluntary sacrifice on the cross. God has answered Achmed's prayers.

## **The Bible in the Life of Achmed**

Achmed's story shows us that God's Word is the guideline for our life, but is not an instruction book for the daily decisions we have to make. Sometimes Christians flee from persecution; sometimes they stay. There is no right or wrong. How do we then know what God's will is? The answer is: we must deepen our relationship with God. The better we know Him, the better we can sense what we should

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do in certain situations. Take Abraham. In Genesis 24, Abraham instructs his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac in Mesopotamia, not in the promised land of Canaan. Had God told Abraham this? No. But years before, God had promised Abraham that the whole land of Canaan would be inhabited by his descendents. They would be a pure people and the Canaanites were far from pure. Abraham knew God's Word (after all, God spoke to him) and knew how he should apply it.

"I'm looking for my brothers," says Joseph in Genesis 37:16. Open Doors founder, Brother Andrew, says that the mission of Christians is always to look for their brothers and sisters. We see in Achmed that the persecuted Church has a great need of contact. He lost his earthly family and for all of his Christian life he has been looking for a new family with whom he is not bound by "earthly blood" but by the blood of Christ.

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10) Allah is a distant God, a judge and not a father or a shepherd. This is why Achmed was so touched by the fact that God really can love people. In John 10:10, Jesus reveals an important part of His character. He is like a shepherd who knows His sheep and the sheep know Him. There is no distance, but a deep, personal bond. The disciples do not understand this. This is why Jesus explains, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." For Achmed, life only took on its full meaning when he came to know Christ.

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## **For Reflection**

How do you perceive that Jesus gives you life to the fullest?

### **What You Can Do**

Go and look for your brothers and sisters from the persecuted Church. Establish contact with them. In prayer (for example, pray a Psalm for them), in the Bible (discover which followers of God suffered for their faith), by means of a card, or perhaps even a trip.

*When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."*

*Mark (Mark 2:5)*

# YARNI, THERESIA, ALFITA AND NOVIANA

INDONESIA

## *The Journey to Forgiveness*

It was Saturday morning, October 29, 2005, an ordinary, warm school day on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi for the friends Noviana, Yarni, Theresa (all three 15) and Alfita (17). As usual, they took the path through the jungle to get to their school. They were looking forward to the day, they were happy, and they were messing around together. They picked flowers to put in their hair. They did not know what a horrible fate was awaiting them that day. Of course, they were aware of the tensions between the Christian community and the Muslim community. Between 2000 and 2002, many Christians and Muslims had been killed in the violence. And now, too, there were sporadic incidents in which Muslims attacked Christians. In the town of Poso, where they lived, there had been eleven murders since 2002 and thirty-three bomb attacks. The four knew that there were Muslim groups who were trying to provoke Christians so that large-scale disturbances would again take place.

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Noviana, Yarni, Theresia and Alfita had never thought that they would be directly involved in this. They were not afraid of Muslims. They were dreaming about their weddings, their future homes, and having children, even though this was some way off yet. They were occupied with 'girly' things. Life was good.

They walked deeper and deeper into the jungle. They laughed and teased one another. They had no idea that further on, six armed men were hiding behind trees and bushes.

Noviana dropped a little way behind her friends in order to pick a flower. Suddenly, she heard a horrendous scream. She stood up with a jerk. She saw men with machetes hacking at her friends. Yarni was just in front of her and dropped to the ground. Noviana froze. She was paralyzed by panic. Everything was happening so quickly. The men started to come in her direction. Noviana tried to get away, but one of the attackers grabbed her and hit her with his machete. Noviana felt a sharp pain in her right cheek and neck. She was bleeding severely. "Jesus, save me!" was the only thought that came to her. She pulled free from her assailant and ran away. She was not looking where she was going and suddenly she fell over forwards, into a small ravine. This was her salvation. The men did not follow her. In a state of complete shock, she ran back to Poso.

While Noviana was escaping, the attackers looked at the lifeless bodies of the three girls. They cut off their heads and put them in black plastic bags and left the bodies lying there. One of the heads was put in front of a church. They left the other two in the street. To one of the bags, they attached a note: "We require a hundred heads."

Within a few hours, the news of the gruesome murders spread around Poso. The town emptied. The Christian inhabitants fled because of the possibility that the attack was just a prelude to a bigger offensive. This turned out not to be the case, but fear had taken hold of the Christian community.

Noviana came round in hospital. The doctors had bandaged her wounds. The disinfectant hurt. Noviana's mother, Nur, was sitting by her bedside.

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“Are they still alive?” asked Noviana.

“They’re in the hospital in Tentena,” replied Nur.

The day after the murder, while Noviana was still in hospital, Nur and the parents of the children who had been killed had to go to the police station. There they spoke to journalists. Nur burst into tears. “What has my daughter done wrong? Why did she deserve this?”

The fathers of Yarni, Theresia and Alfita could barely contain their feelings either. “They were always so cheerful, active, and popular. They were doing very well at school.”

Theresia’s father, Hendrius, said his daughter was obedient and pious. “She never missed a church service. I’ll never forget that she always made coffee for me, every morning. Now she’s gone, I can only weep.”

“I loved her voice so much,” said Yarni’s father, Markus, about his daughter. “She sang in the choir so beautifully. How terrible to know that I will never hear that voice again. Lord in Heaven, please receive her at Your side.”

The parents told the media that they were not seeking vengeance. They wanted to prevent a further outbreak of violence. “We are certain that these people are out for more bloodshed in Poso,” said Noviana’s mother Nur. “But we are not allowing ourselves to be provoked. We are insisting that the police bring the murderers to justice.”

The family members of the victims indicated that they were willing to forgive the murderers. By pronouncing forgiveness so quickly, they received much criticism, even from the Christian community. Was there still any reason for the police to hunt down the perpetrators? Still the police did their job and detained some (not all) of the perpetrators. Three men were given prison sentences ranging from ten to twenty years.

No punishment would bring back the three girls. Nothing could undo what had been done. When she heard that her friends had been beheaded, Noviana did not want to live anymore.

## The Way to Forgiveness

The way to forgiveness was not easy. Alfita's mother still remembers vividly how she heard that her daughter had been brutally killed. "When I heard that my daughter and her friends had been murdered, I burst into tears. I called out to God, 'Why? Why did my daughter lose her life in such a horrendous way? She was so young...'"

Of course, there is always sadness when a loved one dies. "But to lose my daughter in this way is almost too much to bear," she continued. "I could only do one thing: ask God for His peace, the peace that you cannot explain, the peace that you receive by trusting in Him. I received this peace during the funeral. Although Alfita was brutally murdered, I knew that she was safe in God's arms in heaven. And I derived much comfort from the thought that my daughter and I will one day be together again in the presence of Jesus. When I received that peace, I was able to forgive the murderers."

Still it seems an impossible step. How can you forgive the people who have robbed your daughter of her life? "Many people ask me this question," says Alfita's mother. "They say that if it had happened to them, they would have taken vengeance. I had such thoughts too. My feelings told me that I should hit back, but the Bible says something else. To forgive these murderers was something that I could only do through God's Word. The Bible tells us that we must forgive. Even more, we must love those who hate us." Nevertheless, her anger is strong. "But God's peace and love were stronger. I am able to accept that God's will for my daughter is perfect. This is why I have foregone my 'right' to revenge."

Yarni's mother was completely broken when she heard how her daughter had been killed. "I prayed to God for strength. Otherwise I would not have been able to carry on with my life. When I saw her body, I cried so much. I fell on her body and called out, 'Yarni, my daughter, why have you left me? Why have you left your

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mother?’ I asked God to give me strength again because it was too much for me.”

Still, she is getting on much better now. “This is because so many people have been praying for me. I think about how Jesus was hanging on the cross. He saw the people who had nailed Him there and He prayed for them, ‘Father forgive them. They know not what they are doing.’ This verse helped me a great deal. If my Lord can forgive those who crucified Him, then I can certainly forgive the men who killed my daughter, because I want to be as much like Jesus as possible.”

## Scars

Despite many operations on her face, the scar on Noviana’s cheek is still visible. It runs almost from her nose to her shoulder. But the spiritual wound runs much deeper and will likewise not heal completely.

When an Open Doors staff member visits her, she is willing to go to the path where she was attacked. It is an important moment to help her in the process of coming to terms with what happened. She points out where they were walking, where the men came from and where her friends died.

‘All the memories are coming back,’ she says. “Talking and laughing with my friends, but also the images of the attack.”

A colleague from Open Doors asks, “Some people in your village have forgiven the men, and others have not. How do you see this?”

“I do understand the people who are not willing to forgive. It is difficult. Very difficult. But the Lord taught us to forgive people who do evil to us. Even though they wanted to murder me, I have to forgive. The verse that now comes to me is Matthew 5:44: ‘But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’”

Is she still angry with the men? Noviana thinks hard for a mo-

ment. “Yes, sometimes I still feel angry, but it does help if I pray for the murderers. I pray that they will open their hearts to God and that they will show repentance, so that they never murder again.”

And the future? How will she one day tell her children how she came by the scar? “I’ll tell them the truth, but I will emphasize even more how great and strong God’s grace is that I experience in my life.” After the conversation, Noviana leaves for a beautiful spot near Poso. Here she can rest, reflect and have contact with God. She talks about forgiveness as if it is easy (“You have to forgive your enemies. That’s just what the Bible says”), as if you can just turn the switch on and off. But this is preceded by a journey. Still Noviana and the surviving relatives know more than anyone else that this is not a journey you can take alone. Jesus Christ is going along with them, and when it becomes too difficult for them, He carries them.

### **The Bible in the Life of Noviana**

“Son, your sins are forgiven,” Jesus tells a lame man in Mark 2:5 when He sees the faith of this man and his friends. If we believe—this means that we really entrust our lives to Him—God forgives our sins. The concept that we are sinful people who need forgiveness is the basis of forgiving other people. We may not be murderers, but this does not make us righteous. In Ephesians 2:1, it even says that we were dead in our transgressions and sins. Without being linked in faith to Christ’s death and resurrection, we are not justified and we are not forgiven. Noviana and the surviving relatives have demonstrated in word and deed that they are people who have been forgiven by quickly taking the initiative to forgive the murderers. Why? Precisely because they know that they are forgiven. “Love your enemy.” This is a commandment, something that we must do.

Still, Biblical commandments are not always easy to carry out. As it is revealed in the various accounts in this book, the path to forgiveness is a difficult one. Does this mean that we must abandon

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this path? Of course not. Jesus clearly calls us to enter through the narrow gate, because only this way leads to life (Matthew 7:13,14). As Takoosh Hovsepian explains so well: forgiveness starts with the decision to forgive and then you pray that God will do the rest, that He will transform your heart so you might be capable of forgiving. This is the process that has taken place in Noviana and is still taking place.

There is another foundational stone that gives Noviana and the family members of the girls who died the strength to forgive. This is the realization that these words from Romans 8:35-39 are true: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: ‘For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jan Vermeer

## For Reflection

Are there people you must forgive and why?

## What You Can Do

Are you attending school or college? Perhaps you could give a talk, write an article or a paper about the lessons from the persecuted church.

*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.*

*Paul (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)*

# AAINA

## THE MIDDLE EAST

### *When I Look at Jesus, I Don't Sink*

It started as a nice story. Fifteen-year-old Aaina was rummaging through the family library looking for a new book to read. Her fingers ran from cover to cover. As what happens in many children's stories, she suddenly discovered two thick volumes hidden behind the other books. She took the books off the shelf and looked at the titles. They were the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Forbidden literature in many Muslim homes. Aaina knew this. Really she ought to put the books back, but she was too curious. Of course, she knew who these books were about. Jesus. She had sometimes heard about this in the past. When she was six, she used to play with a Christian girl. At their house, there was a beautiful, illustrated book about the birth of Jesus. Her friend had been given it for her birthday.

Aaina had sneaked up to it and carefully allowed the pages to slip through her fingers. Secretly, she looked at the pictures. She saw Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus. From that moment on, she

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had a love for this child and the man He was to become. It was inexplicable. It was simply there.

She had also encountered “Isa” (the Arabic for Jesus) in the Koran. Every time she read about Jesus, she felt love for Him. And now she had the books of the Christians in her hands. Quickly she read a few pages. The message that Jesus loved her reached straight to her heart, yet she did not understand anything of the gospel. How could God have a Son? And why did He allow Him to die?

Aaina took the books to her room and hid them there. In the weeks and months that followed, she regularly read the Bible. She knew that she had to do more with God’s Word. She wanted to get to know Jesus better, but how? She did not really understand the Bible.

In the Arab country where she was living, only the traditional, Orthodox Church was visible. Christians went there to be given an explanation of their faith. Aaina was sure that she should go there too; but would the priest dare to talk to her? It was forbidden for Christians to talk to Muslims about their faith. What if he were to send her away? What if someone were to see her?

Aaina decided to pluck up her courage and go to the church. Without knowing it, Aaina had become a secret believer.

## Twenty Years Later

I find myself in a church in the Middle East in the hope of being able to meet Christians from a Muslim background for our campaign, “Secret believers” [see chapter about Achmed]. My contact person introduces me to Aaina, a small, Arab woman with dark curly hair and dull, fearful eyes.

“Are you willing to be interviewed?” asks my contact.

Aaina looks at me shyly and I wonder what she thinks of this Westerner. She knows that I have come to write about her and to ask people to pray for her. I assure her that all details will be omitted that would enable people with evil intent to discover her identity.

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She shakes her head. “I first want to pray,” she replies. “I’ll be back in ten minutes.”

Not until twenty minutes later does Aaina come into the little office again. “I’ll do it,” she says. “But I come from an important family and they’re looking for me. So you must not write anything specific about them and you must not say what country I come from.”

I promise her that I will abide by this. She tells me of how she grew up in a respectable Muslim family, though they were not strict Muslims. She did not have to pray five times a day or go to the mosque regularly.

The conversation is difficult. Aaina is still afraid to talk. Only when she starts to tell about how she “discovered” Jesus when she was six does she begin to beam. But as soon as she tells about how her parents became suspicious, the light in her eyes goes out again. “I don’t even know how it happened, but my family realized that I was taking too much interest in Christianity.”

She stares down at the floor, while she lets the painful memories surface. “My whole family was against me, especially my mother. ‘You’re a Muslim,’ she said. ‘Why are you throwing your life away? Why aren’t you like other girls? You’ll soon be going to university and then you’re going to marry a respected Muslim!’” Aaina’s voice fades away, and for a moment, she does not say anything. “I suffered a lot,” Aaina then continues. “But still I kept reading the Bible in secret. The Lord Jesus kept drawing me closer to Him.”

### **“We’ve found a good husband for you”**

The church Aaina attended in secret received her well, but of course, she was not free to believe. University provided new opportunities for Aaina. She went to live in lodgings in another town. Finally, she was away from her parents. She had the feeling that she still had to find the truth (for instance, she was praying more to Mary than to Jesus), and now she really had the scope to go and look.

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There was one problem. She had read that she was to have a roommate named Maryam. Aaina assumed from her name that she was a Muslim. Her disappointment was short-lived. Maryam turned out to be a secret believer too!

Aaina and Maryam soon became best friends. Maryam took Aaina along to an Evangelical church. In the church service, the emphasis was on Jesus Christ. She liked the service very much, but still, afterwards, she went as soon as possible to the Orthodox church to confess that she had been to an Evangelical fellowship.

At a certain point, Aaina went to her parental home to celebrate her birthday. While she was in her old room, a feeling of despair came over her. She called out in prayer to Jesus. "Which way should I go? I want to walk in Your path! I need You! I love You! I am willing to die for You!" A burden fell from Aaina. The despair disappeared and she felt a warmth and joy inside. She had to talk to someone about it and could only think of one person. She quickly picked up the telephone and dialed Maryam's number.

"Maryam, Maryam! Now I'm just like you!" she cried. "What do you mean?" asked Maryam.

"I've prayed to Jesus and said I really want to belong to Him!" Aaina could not stay on the phone for long. She heard her mother's voice calling from downstairs. She skipped down the stairs.

"Aaina," said her mother. "We've found a good husband for you. When would you like to meet him?"

The euphoria that had seized Aaina was immediately gone. Her mother continued to talk about who the man was and how he was highly regarded.

Aaina shook her head. "I don't want to meet him." She turned around and went back to her room. She was desperately unhappy. Why had her joy lasted so short a time?

Soon afterwards, Aaina was back in her student flat. The doorbell rang and the marriage partner suggested by her parents was standing on the doorstep—with the permission of her parents. He tried to humor her with sweet words. "Let's go for a little walk. I just

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want to get to know you better,” he said.

Aaina was resolute. She refused. Like a child that does not get its way, he went back to her parents and told them the whole story. They were furious and immediately telephoned Aaina.

### It Was a Huge Disgrace

Aaina falls silent again. In the corners of her eyes teardrops sparkle, and she wipes them away. “Sorry ... it’s so difficult to talk about this...” Again the smile. “But Jesus was there ... the whole time...” This seems to touch her the most.

“It’s beautiful, the way you talk about the Lord Jesus,” I say.

“Really?” she smiles. “I love Him.”

Aaina’s parents insisted that she should get to know the man better. “So every now and then, I went for a walk with him. It was not easy for me. Of course, he started to want more. To go to a restaurant and so on. He wanted us to get engaged, but I couldn’t take that step, and so one day I told him that I had become a Christian. He was so angry...”

The man went back to Aaina’s parents and told them what their daughter had done: that she was now following Jesus. It was a huge disgrace. Aaina is silent for a while. Her thoughts go back to the months of solitary confinement (which she told me about later, without giving many details), but now she does not mention it.

“Later, I met a man with whom I did get along with. His name was Mark. We prayed about our future and decided to marry. This had to be done in secret, because my husband is a Christian by birth. According to the law, he’s not permitted to enter into marriage with a Muslim. If he wanted to marry me officially, he would first have to convert to Islam. We didn’t want that, so we met together with a few friends and the pastor in a small hall in the church. The pastor pronounced a blessing and that was that. Within twenty minutes, we were outside again.”

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In the eyes of the law and the outside world, Aaina and Mark were not married. This meant that living together was out of the question. “We’ve been married for six years now, but I’ve not yet lived under one roof with my husband.”

At this point, I still have no idea of the scenes that are really running through her mind. It is as if I am watching a movie trailer and only get to see parts of the story. Aaina says that she had to flee after a cousin was presented to her as a potential marriage partner. When she refused him too, he wanted to kill her.

Aaina did not know where she was. She tried to remember what had happened. She had been at a family dinner. This was the last thing she could remember.

But where was she now? In bed, in a white room, in the distance ... murmuring. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her parents talking to a doctor. She tried to follow the conversation.

“... used a stomach pump.”

“Doctor, it’s very important that no one hears about this.”

“I understand.”

Slowly it began to dawn on her. She had been poisoned during the meal! Did her parents have anything to do with this? Surely that was not possible? No, she refused to believe it. After all, someone had brought her to the hospital. That must have been her parents. She thanked God that she was still alive.

Aaina’s parents forbade her to talk about the incident. It was better just to get on with life. And it was precisely this that was so difficult for Aaina. In her family, it was known that Aaina was a Christian. She had already been locked up for a time by her parents. She had spent three months in her room in her parental home. And now she had almost been murdered. She was married, but there were only a few people who knew about this. She longed to build up an ordinary life with Mark. She was not at all bothered about the luxury she was used to. She was quite willing to give this up for God and Mark. But could she manage without her family?

One day, there was no time left to think about it. She received a

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telephone call. It was her uncle. He wanted to know where she was. He would send a car to collect her.

Alarm bells started to ring. Aaina had to get away. Today. Now. Immediately. She phoned her pastor and Mark, and set out for the airport. The pastor phoned a colleague in another country to ask him if he could receive Aaina. There was no time to bid Mark farewell properly. He would have to join her later.

Aaina left her country, her family, her church and her husband. She was in shock. Ten months later, when she met me for the first time, she was still terrified.

“My husband was to follow, but he was not granted permission to settle here. Our only hope at the moment is that I can apply for asylum in a western country. If I’m admitted, I can have my husband join me.” Aaina weeps quietly and we pray together. In a whisper, she says, “Will you ask the people in the West to pray that my husband and I ...”

She folds her hands.

“Will be reunited?”

“Yes. Please.”

That week, I see Aaina a few more times in the church where I am conducting my interviews. She is staying with some people, and during the day, she is here in the church. These are the only two places where she feels fairly safe. The church services are recorded with cameras, and so Aaina invariably sits at the back in order not to be pictured. She does not have any friends, only brothers and sisters, to whom she cannot tell who she really is. It is the life of a secret believer.

## Praying on Skype

A few months after my first conversation with Aaina, I hear from the pastor who had arranged for Aaina to apply for asylum in another country. I am given her phone number to ask for myself how

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she is getting on. When I telephone her, at first she does not recognize me and again responds somewhat hesitantly. After I have explained a bit, she realizes who I am and we agree that I will call regularly on Skype.

When I ask how she is getting on, she says, “That’s hard to say. I’m often confused. Since I fled to another country, I’ve been finding it hard to adjust. Not the culture, but to my circumstances. Fortunately, I’m being taken good care of by a Christian couple. Besides that, I’m afraid I don’t know anyone. I’m soon going to have an interview with the immigration service. Then they’re going to decide whether or not I can stay. I’m worn out with the strain of it. My whole future depends on one interview. Will I be allowed to stay here? Will my husband—whom I’ve not seen in two years—then come here too? Or will they send me back, and what will happen to me then?”

I tell her that God is always with her, even when it is difficult. At the same time, I feel guilty. I am not in her position, so it is easy for me to say that God is with her. She replies, “Yes, I know that He is with me. God is good.”

She has not seen her husband for so long now that she feels depressed. “Sometimes we phone or send text messages, but it is so difficult that we cannot hold one another as other married couples can. We have been married for eight years now, but we have never lived together. When will we be able to live a normal life? Will you pray for me? I need this so much...”

I pray with her and tell her that I am not the only one praying for her. “Oh, I’m so pleased about that... I really believe in the power of prayer.”

Through my conversations with Aaina, I come to understand the tension that asylum seekers experience every day. She is not allowed to work. She is not allowed to become part of society. She is only allowed to fill in forms, attend interviews and wait. She has hardly any money. Every now and then, colleagues at Open Doors take a collection for her. Everyone feels sympathy for this secret believer.

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### Communion in a Restaurant

After some time, I make an appointment to meet Aaina. I travel to see her, together with a woman colleague. We have a stack of cards from our supporters with us. We hope they will give Aaina some encouragement.

Aaina does not seem to have changed much since the first time I met her. Her hair is considerably longer. "I'm not going to have it cut anymore until I see Mark again," she says. We sit in a tea-room. "We've brought something for you," we tell her. We give her some small gifts of beauty products (something that I would not have thought of as a man) and the bundle of cards. She allows the pictures to slide through her fingers and occasionally reads a text. "How lovely this is," she says. "I'm going to hang them up in my room. Then I will feel less alone."

For she makes it clear, she does feel alone. She is glad that there are people who are helping her, but she also encounters much incomprehension. Why does she not do this or that? Why does she not start to learn the language of the country where she is staying? These are questions she hears almost daily. But she is not able to. The uncertainty about her future and the fear that something will happen are sucking all the strength and energy out of her. Occasionally, her mobile phone rings. Each time, it rings just once. This is Mark's way of saying that he loves her. "I'll phone him this evening," says Aaina. But Mark keeps on phoning, and so Aaina phones him back. She, too, lets the phone ring once. "We're not able to call often. It's too expensive. So this is what we do."

We ask Aaina if she would like to go somewhere. Would she like to go for a meal? A walk? Shopping? It is all the same to her. "You decide what you want to do. I'll join you."

It seems as if Aaina has lost her enthusiasm for life. In the evening, after we've had a meal in an Italian restaurant and Aaina and my colleague have gone to the bathroom, suddenly I have an idea. I order some bread and one glass of wine.

“It’s almost time for us to part,” I say when they come back. “But there’s one more thing I want to do before we leave. When did you last celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Aaina?”

“Years ago.”

I take out my English Bible and read the text where Jesus inaugurates the Lord’s Supper. Then we together break the bread and drink the wine. I realize that in this crowded restaurant, there are people who do not know there is a woman in their midst who is leading a secret life as a Christian. And they do not know that we are celebrating the Lord’s Supper here on the spot, in communion with Him and in communion with one another. The free and the persecuted church meet one another here.

We leave the restaurant. “We still have to pray,” I say. The three of us turn into an alleyway to get out of the way of people. My colleague and I pray in English, Aaina in Arabic.

On the way to the airport, we make plans for the future. “One day, you’ll come and see us, Aaina,” says my colleague. “And then you’ll bring Mark with you.”

“I hope so,” she replies. “That would be so nice. I would enjoy going on an airplane sometime when I’m not running away.”

This is her first joke of the day, but one with a serious undertone.

## The Joy of Our Redemption

A little while later, I again contact Aaina on Skype. She is more depressed than before. She has still not had a final decision about her asylum status, and Mark’s physical and mental health is not good.

“Why does God not intervene?” This is the question she puts to herself and to me. “Why does it have to take so long?”

Another question pops into my mind. Why don’t you simply become a Muslim again? If Aaina were to reconvert, she would be graciously received. She would simply be able to return to her

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country, to her rich life and her family, whom she misses so much. But she wants to remain faithful to God—and to Mark.

“Do you still experience joy, Aaina?” I ask. I cannot imagine that she will say yes.

But it is the joy of our redemption that gives us strength and helps us to continue when things are difficult. This is why I ask the question anyway.

“If I look inside, very deep inside, then I do perceive joy, yes. You know, actually I feel like Peter getting out of the boat. Around me it is dark and the wind is blowing hard. Behind me are the other disciples in the boat, but I can’t go back. It’s cold and wet. But as long as I look ahead of me, to the bright Light that’s shining there, to Jesus Christ Himself, I will not sink.”

“And do you know what?” I reply. “If a day comes when you do sink, Jesus will pull you out of the water as He did with Peter.”

## Good News

A call. I see from the number that it is from Aaina and I go to a quiet place in the office. “Jan, Jan! It’s worked! I have been granted asylum!” I shout with joy along with her and together we thank God. At last there is the prospect of reunification with her husband. This still takes a few months, during which Aaina goes through difficult periods, but in the end, Mark is also granted permission to stay in the country where Aaina is living. They still have a long path to recovery and are only just starting to build up their life, but in any case, they are together again. And in typical “Aaina style,” she summarizes her story in three words: “God is good.”

## The Bible in the Life of Aaina

“And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?” (Luke 18:7) Jesus teaches us constantly to raise our voices to God. In our prayers, we can—no, we must—bring our needs to Him. Of course, prayer is much more than presenting our list of requests. But if there is injustice, we can constantly bring this before God’s throne. In Revelation 8, we see that there is an altar before God’s throne with our prayers. They are constantly in God’s sight. Not one will fall off. But He is the loving, almighty and omniscient God. He does with our prayers what is best. In this trust, we can pray and believe. Aaina did this and so did the Open Doors supporters. Day and night, prayers were said for her and God held (and holds) Aaina and Mark in His hand.

“Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10) Joy is a central concept in the life of every Christian. In the New Testament, we read that the apostles went to prison for God with joy, and we know that many of them died with joy. Jesus Himself was able to endure the agonizing death on Good Friday because He knew what joy was awaiting Him (Hebrews 12:2). Aaina also experienced joy deep down inside, while waves of despair overtook her, and it was this joy which gave her the strength to get up every day.

“Come,” He said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus.” (Matthew 14:29) There are many spiritual lessons in the story of Jesus walking on the water and Peter walking towards Him. Just like Peter, Aaina had asked Jesus if she could go to Him. In the story, Peter is the only disciple who asks this question. This is immediately an important lesson: not every follower of Jesus actually dares to go to Jesus. Accepting His invitation sometimes means walking on water. Aaina knew very well the risk she was taking when she became a Christian, but she still chose God. And when it became very difficult and the waves were high and the night was long, cold and wet, she still focused her

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gaze only on that bright Light before her, Jesus Christ Himself. As long as she was looking at Him, she did not sink.

### For Reflection

How much joy do you experience in the faith? What can you do—or what must happen—for you to experience more joy?

### What You Can Do

You could, for example, request a prayer calendar from a Christian organization and pray daily or weekly for (persecuted) Christians. If the prayer requests for a certain person strike you particularly, pray daily for this Christian. Then it is as if God has allocated him or her to you.

*Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to  
save, nor His ear too dull to hear.*

*Isaiah (Isaiah 59:1)*



# JAN

## FREE WORLD

### *Faith: Hoping For What You Cannot See*

Omar is my hero. I have never met him, unfortunately, and I know hardly anything about him. Still, I hope one day to be able to talk to him, as I have to most of the people in this book.

Omar was sixty-nine years old and was still fully active as a Church leader in his country. At least, I assume he was. In Somalia, you do not just happen to go out with a bag containing twenty-five copies of the Bible unless you are an active Church leader. He also baptized many Muslims who converted to Christianity.

In Somalia, it is perilous to be active in this way. For years, the country has not been governed. There is an interim government that controls large parts of the country with the assistance of Ethiopian troops, but there are also Islamic rebels who hunt down their opponents in the name of Allah. Christians are a prime target.

Omar must have known what a risk he was taking in leaving his home in Mogadishu in a crowded bus. Not far outside the city, the rebels had set up a check point. All the passengers had to get

out. Then the rebels examined their luggage. They found the bag of Bibles.

“Who do these Bibles belong to?”

No one replied. One of the rebels took some photos out of the bag and began to compare the passengers’ faces with the photos. They recognized Omar.

“Do these books belong to you?” they asked him. Omar did not reply.

I would like one day to ask him what he was thinking at that moment. Was he praying to God? Did he experience peace? Did he know that he was going to die? I will have to wait until I get to heaven myself before I can ask him this.

Omar was shot dead on the spot.

The rebels took his body with them to the little town of Merca, where they dumped it in a square. The Bibles were thrown down on top of him. The Muslim extremists announced the death of Omar on the radio, as a warning to many.

Omar was buried the same day, but his wife and seven children were not able to be there. The chance that they, too, would be murdered was much too great.

Stories like this make us think. Which decisions would we make? A meeting with the persecuted church is a confrontation with our faith. A collision would perhaps be a better description. What we unconsciously do each day is test the Bible against our lives. Many of us read the New Testament and do not reflect on the persecution of Christians. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, does write that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Tim 3:12)

I cannot apply this text to my own life. I am not persecuted for my faith. But I can decide to become one with those who are oppressed because they are Christians, and I can try to support them. This is why I wrote this book.

Writing it was not an easy process. There were moments when I had to stop because I literally became sick of what people do to

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one another. I saw photos of the friends of Noviana after they were beheaded and I omitted the most gruesome details about Hyo's torture. In my mind's eye, I still see the sorrowful eyes of Allina and I hear Takoosh saying that she has to forgive her husband's murderers again every day.

My distress does not matter. This is my way of sharing in the sufferings of the persecuted church. After all, God says in 1 Corinthians 12:26: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." We share in the suffering, but also in the joy.

All the people in this book say with complete conviction, "Jesus is my Savior." This expresses their personal relationship with their Redeemer. Not only did He give His life so that we could be saved for eternity, but He is also profoundly involved with us personally in this life. After all, He said Himself, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

It seems as if God is very close by when we are suffering for Him. C.S. Lewis says in his book *The Problem of Pain* that suffering is God's megaphone, with which He wakes up a deaf world.

This is also the conclusion of some of the pastors whom I met in Nigeria. "There is a battle going on in Nigeria," they said. "It is a battle for the souls of our country. God is trying to teach us something."

Nigerian Christians are tired of the violence. Going to church has become almost like playing Russian roulette. Every Sunday, somewhere in the country there are attacks and brothers and sisters are murdered. The call to strike back is becoming stronger and stronger, but this is just playing into the opponents' hands. They want a civil war.

The sermon of one of the pastors I spoke to was disrupted when he told the congregation that they had to love Muslims. A young man called out, "We cannot do that! We have to fight back!"

The pastor remained calm and asked the man to come to the front to explain his point of view. Then he asked him who Jesus was to him.

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“He’s my Savior.”

“Only your Savior?”

“No, my Lord, too.”

“And what does it mean if He’s your Lord?”

“That I have to surrender my life to Him.”

“All right. And do you believe everything that is written in the Bible?”

“Yes, every word.”

The pastor read out Jesus’ command that we must love our enemies. The young man had nothing more to counter this.

“We must do what Jesus says despite the circumstances. Perhaps we are under fire so much in Nigeria because we have not demonstrated Christ’s love adequately to our Muslim brothers. And now, in this climate of violence, it’s much more difficult to get through to them.”

The voice of the Nigerian church is echoed in our situation in the West. Is the reason that the church in Western countries is being increasingly marginalized also because we have not properly demonstrated Christian love to our neighbors? Is there not only a battle taking place for the soul of Nigeria, but also for the soul of America, of England, of Germany, of Belgium, of the Netherlands, and so on?

“God wants to teach us something through the suffering,” say the Nigerian pastors. It is a theology I struggle with, but this is how persecuted Christians perceive it.

In the almost ten years that I have been involved with the persecuted church, I have often wondered what the difference is between the persecuted church and the free church. Or, to make it more personal, what is the difference between a persecuted Christian and me. Apart from the “external circumstances”, there does not have to be any difference. What is really important is the extent to which we dare to trust Jesus. If we really trust Him, we will follow Him.

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### Dying to the Glory of God

What kind of lifestyle goes with this? Paul writes to the Philippians, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:21) This is crazy. Have you ever thought about this? How can dying be gain? After all, here on earth I represent Jesus, don’t I? Here on earth I can serve Him, can’t I? Here on earth we have parties, football matches, friends, work, don’t we? How can dying be gain?

I wonder whether Peter told Paul about his conversation with Jesus on the beach. In the last chapter of John, it says that Jesus tells Peter that someone will take him to a place where he does not want to go. The writer, John, adds, “Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.” To glorify God. How can you glorify God by your death?

God is honored in our death if we show in our death that we consider Him more important than life. We honor Him in our death if we leave everything behind but still look forward, full of expectation, to the reward which is waiting for us. And the most important reward is that we can always be with our Redeemer. Imagine you were the only sinner on the earth. Even then Jesus would have gone to the cross. This is the God we can be with.

But how do you reach the point of being able to honor Jesus in your living and dying? The most important thing is that you make the decision. In the nineteenth century, there was a group of Armenian Christians. The Turks came and the Armenian monks were lined up. They were given the choice: Islam or the sword. Anyone who did not decide on Islam was stabbed in the stomach and died a slow, painful death. The Armenians, one and all, chose the sword.

Imagine that this were to happen to us. Would you choose Jesus? Let me tell you this: if the day comes when you have to choose between dying for Christ or living for the world and that day is the first time that you think about this, you will choose the world.

Take Allina from Chechnya. She has so little knowledge of the Bible. She knows practically nothing other than that God loves her,

a poor widow with four children. And this is enough. This is why she is willing to die for Him.

Allina also wants to live for Him. This is a good thing too. This does not apply to all Christians. A Pakistani pastor told me that the majority of Christians in his country would rather die than become Muslims, but they are not willing to live for Jesus Christ.

I also find this very difficult. A while ago, I was with my church fellowship and I thought to myself, what has the faith actually cost our fellowship? How many people have been in prison? How many people have given their lives for the gospel? I said to God, "If it is necessary to get our fellowship moving, I offer myself up to be the first."

But I find it much more difficult to make decisions for Him day by day. There are many temptations. No one pays any attention if you do not radically follow Christ.

I also admit that I sometimes doubt God's goodness, especially when I look at North Korea and meet people who have experienced the most horrible things. I recall sitting in the airplane after I had met Eun-Sook.

Eun-Sook is a Chinese-Korean woman with relatives in North Korea. One day, her niece Mi-Young appeared on the doorstep. She had fled to China and had been forced to marry a poor Chinese farmer who abused her. She had already had several children by him. Besides this, she had left a teenage daughter behind in North Korea.

Mi-Young had come to ask for money. The ability to love others, or even to trust them, had completely gone. Eun-Sook helped her as best she could, despite the fact that Mi-Young repeatedly lied to her. Eun-Sook forgave her and remained open to Mi-Young. Slowly Mi-Young began to change. She came to trust Eun-Sook. They wept together, sometimes read the Bible, and prayed. This changed Mi-Young's heart from the inside. She even learned to love her children.

Mi-Young did not want to flee to South Korea. She wanted to wait for her daughter in North Korea to be old enough to flee to China. Then she would be able to leave with her whole family. She

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did not know whether her husband, an alcoholic, would want to go or not.

One day, fate took a hand. The police raided Eun-Sook's house when Mi-Young was visiting. The officers took both women away. Eun-Sook was put under pressure to provide information about other refugees.

“Do you know what we are going to do to Mi-Young?”

“Yes, you're going to send her back to North Korea.”

“And what will happen then?”

Eun-Sook broke down. “Then she'll be murdered. Please don't send her back! Let me go in her place! She has children she has to care for. I have no one. Let me go.”

The police refused. That night, one of the police came into Eun-Sook's cell. He was clearly drunk. “I would prefer to let her go free,” he said.

“Why don't you do so then?” asked Eun-Sook.

“I'd lose my job. I have a wife and children, you know. They have to eat.”

What a picture of the world. In this cell, on one side, there was Eun-Sook, who was willing to give up her life, and on the other side, there was this policeman who did not want to lose his job. A woman who had heard the voice of Jesus and got out of the boat, and a man who only saw what the world had to offer him.

Eun-Sook was released again. Mi-Young was sent back to North Korea and put in a prison camp. As far as we know, she is still there.

When I met Eun-Sook a few months after her arrest, she still felt incredibly guilty. “My niece is in a prison camp because of me. If she had not come to my house for Bible study, this would not have happened. Every time when I hear children playing or laughing outside, I am reminded of Mi-Young's children, who have to manage without their mother. Sometimes I literally feel the cold floor, the fear, the hunger and the exhaustion that Mi-Young must feel in the prison camp. Open Doors is helping the children financially, but still...”

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God has spoken many words of comfort to Eun-Sook. Especially through Psalm 23. “This has encouraged me greatly.” Eun-Sook paused. “But...I pray...that Mi-Young will hold on to her faith. I know that God is faithful, but Mi-Young is still such a young believer. She had such fine dreams... She dreamed of being reunited with her North Korean daughter, of sharing the gospel with her, and moving to a country where it is safe, where she could build up a new life with all of her children. Instead, now every day she wakes up in a hellish place.”

I prayed for Eun-Sook. Then she got up and said, “I have to accept that Mi-Young is in the shadow of the valley of death, but that God is there with her to comfort her and lead her. He is always with us, wherever we are.”

While I was running over this conversation in the airplane, I was overwhelmed with sorrow. I tried to find comfort in the Bible, and came to Romans 8:18: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

I let the verse soak into me. Paul, the apostle who had suffered so much himself, says here that the suffering of this time is much less than the reward that we will one day receive.

“Lord,” I prayed, “I cannot see it. When I look at North Korea or at another country where Christians are persecuted, I do not see that the reward is much greater than the suffering.”

Immediately, a thought came to me. It was as if God were saying, “But Jan, is this not precisely what faith is about? Faith is hoping for what you do not see.”

This taught me that we must not view the Bible through the lens of the world, but that we must view the world through a Biblical lens. The persecuted church helps us in this. The main characters in this book have learned to assess the situation through God’s eyes. He is always sovereign. Always. Even when we do not see this. And, as Joseph told his brothers, God turns evil to good. He holds everyone in His hand.

Things are still difficult for Allina, but she is following Jesus

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with heart and soul.

Lee Joo-Chan and Hyo are struggling with their past, but time and again, God reveals His love. Hyo called me a few weeks ago, almost in ecstasy. “Jan, my grandma is in South Korea!” The grandma who had collected Hyo from prison after he had been tortured almost to death is still alive and, contrary to all expectations, Hyo is able to meet her again.

Hae-Woo is completely happy in South Korea. Her prayers have been heard. She is able to share her testimony with other Christians. This book is proof of this answer to prayer. Haik and Mehdi are no longer with us, but the Church in Iran is experiencing a huge growth. Haik’s family is playing a great role in this. From America, they are making television programs to train Christians and reach Muslims.

Unfortunately, I no longer have contact with Achmed. Still, I am convinced that his greatest desire has been fulfilled: he has been able to tell his children about the gospel.

Noviana is greatly encouraged by the many cards that she has received. Of course, she still has difficult moments. Forgiving does not mean that you forget what has happened.

Aaina and Mark are trying to build up their life again. This is hard.

Even though they are far from their own country, in a certain sense, they are still in hiding. Aaina would like to contact her family, but this is still much too dangerous. Yet she knows that God is faithful.

The conversations with persecuted Christians have changed my life. I have come to realize that we—the “free” and the persecuted Christians—after all do form one body: the Body of Christ. Together we laugh; together we weep. Together we build; together we pray. And also—together we suffer.

Persecuted Christians find themselves in the garden of Gethsemane, the garden of pain. They may feel lonely and deserted there, but we can come to them through prayer, sit next to them, and

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bear the pain with them. But there is a third person present in the garden: Jesus Christ Himself. He knows our pain and bears it. His sacrifice two thousand years ago has made all the suffering worthwhile. Even more, as Paul writes, the suffering of this time is not proportionate to the glory that will be revealed.

### **For Reflection**

Are you willing/do you dare to offer yourself in His service? For this, you can pray a prayer that many persecuted Christians pray. It is the most dangerous prayer on earth: "Lord, here I am."

# OPEN DOORS

Open Doors began in 1955, when a Dutch Christian discovered that Christians in the Eastern Bloc desperately needed Bibles. And so he took a suitcase full of Christian books with him to countries behind the Iron Curtain. The man, known as Brother Andrew, became identified around the world as “God’s smuggler”.

Sixty years later, Open Doors supports Christians in about sixty countries, whether oppression is taking place in the name of Communism, Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam. Wherever God’s children are suppressed, Open Doors is supporting them in their need and allowing these believers to indicate themselves what forms of assistance can best be provided for them.

Open Doors ensures that your gifts end up where they are of the greatest value for our persecuted brothers and sisters. Pastors and church fellowships can be trained so that they can resist. The church can be strengthened in its resolve to carry out its task, so that even under pressure, it can share the gospel of Jesus Christ. And those who have lost so much can receive material aid and spiritual encouragement.

At the moment, Open Doors is helping many Christians around the world to build up personal relationships with the persecuted church. They do this by travelling to these places in order to provide encouragement and prayer. They also bring Bibles and other Christian literature. Many are also willing to pass on prayer requests within their churches or share the lessons that we can learn from our brothers and sisters.

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Open Doors wants to encourage and support those who take up this challenge by bringing them into contact with God's persecuted church worldwide. In this way, you can pray with them and not only for them. You can learn from them as well as give to them. And together we can play our part in God's wonderful plan and purpose for His world.

For more information about the persecuted church and prayer requests, see:

*[www.opendoorsusa.org](http://www.opendoorsusa.org)*















