



THE VOICE OF THE MARTYRS
DIE STEM VAN DIE MARTELARE

May 2023



THE NEED

OF THE HOUR

RECEIVING A
FORBIDDEN BOOK

THE ULTIMATE
CONTRABAND



"Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." Heb 13:3

A LETTER

from a Father to a Son

Years ago, Hossein received two gifts that terrified him.

He and his friends were talking about movies while sitting in a park one afternoon, when a stranger walked up and handed him a book and a magazine.

"He had heard us discussing a movie," said Hossein, now 22. "He asked me to take a look at a review of that movie that was printed in the magazine."

When Hossein asked the man how much the magazine cost, he was told it was free. "These are gifts from God," the man said, smiling.

When Hossein got home, he started reading the magazine. After reading the review of a foreign film he had seen, he continued reading and discovered that the magazine was a Christian publication. Then he realized the book he had received was a Bible — a book that is illegal to own, print, import or distribute in his Iranian homeland.

Suddenly, he was gripped with fear. "I was so scared, because my family are devoted Muslims," Hossein said. "Many

things went through my mind that night, and I wished I hadn't been given those books."

He got rid of the Bible and magazine the next day, but a few nights later he had a bizarre dream about children *eating* books. And each book looked exactly like the Bible Hossein had received.

The dream nagged at Hossein for several days, until he eventually returned to the park hoping to find the man who had given him the Bible and magazine. But he never saw the man again.

Then, just days later, Hossein was shocked to see his brother, Mahmoud, come home with a Bible of his own.

Fearing God

Mahmoud had been studying twice a week with a student named Ehsan since recently falling behind in his college classes. As Mahmoud was preparing to leave Ehsan's house after studies one night, he saw his friend's family surround Ehsan's gravely ill grandmother, place

their hands on her and pray for her healing in Jesus' name.

"I didn't understand them," Mahmoud said, "but their voices and words were powerful. Ehsan kindly led me out while I was watching them."

When Mahmoud returned to Ehsan's home for the next study session, Ehsan's grandmother opened the door and cheerfully welcomed him inside. Mahmoud later asked Ehsan if the family's prayers had led to his grandmother's healing.

"Yes, thank God," Ehsan told him. "It's because of God's power and His authority." Ehsan then told Mahmoud about Jesus, giving him a Bible when he expressed interest in learning more.

Mahmoud's parents were incensed when they discovered his Bible. After demanding to know where he got it, Mahmoud's father, Khodayar, grabbed the Bible and threw it toward a far corner of the yard. He expected Allah's immediate wrath for having the book in his home.

“Do you know what will happen if Dad catches you with this Bible? Do you want me to get in trouble?”

Answered Prayers

After seeing how angry it had made his father, Mahmoud wanted nothing more to do with the Bible. But in the middle of the night, he got up to get a drink and noticed a small beam of light coming from Hossein's room. When he looked in, he saw his brother sitting in the corner of his otherwise dark room, reading.

As Mahmoud walked toward Hossein, he noticed that he was flattening the pages of a book with his hands. Then he realized his brother was reading the Bible their father had thrown out of the house.

Startled by Mahmoud's shadowy figure standing over him, Hossein shoved the Bible under a rug.

“Do you know what will happen if Dad catches you with this Bible?” Mahmoud asked him. “Do you want me to get in trouble?”

“I want to see your friend Ehsan,” Hossein replied, insisting that he was going to keep the Bible. But Mahmoud, upset by his brother's defiance, ignored Hossein and walked away. Over time, and after continuing to read the Bible in secret, Hossein placed his faith in Jesus Christ.

Months later, when the boys' mother was unable to have a needed heart surgery because of her diabetes, Mahmoud felt helpless watching her groan in pain. As he worried about how the family would pay for his mother's treatments, he remembered that Ehsan's grandmother had been healed through prayer.

With Hossein's help, Mahmoud took their mother to Ehsan's home, where they received a warm welcome. Ehsan's family then surrounded their mother, praying for her in the name of Jesus. Hossein, as a new Believer, joined them in prayer.

“My mother was confused at first,” Mahmoud recalled. “But after that, she said that the prayers made her feel so light and happy.”

When the three of them returned home, Khodayar scolded the boys for taking their mother to the Christians. “It would have been better for your mother to die than for you to bring shame to our family!” he yelled. Their sister also shouted at them, accusing Mahmoud of being responsible for their family's problems.

That week, Ehsan stayed in touch with Mahmoud, encouraging him to read his Bible. Eventually, the two met at their neighbourhood park, and Mahmoud, like his brother, came to faith in Christ. From then on, Mahmoud prayed for his mother and the rest of the family daily, and within weeks his mother was free of pain.

When his sister took their mother to a doctor's appointment a short time later, they learned that she had been completely healed.

Breaking Through

That night, when Khodayar came home from work, Mahmoud noticed that his father seemed troubled. As Mahmoud

approached him to see what was wrong, he saw a Bible in his father's hands. The Bible, Khodayar explained, had been gift-wrapped and placed in their mailbox.

Overhearing their conversation, Hossein walked over and took his father's hand. “Dad, please, it's the second time you've had a Bible in your hands,” he said. “Perhaps God wants to talk to you. Before crumpling it up and throwing it away, please read it.”

Expecting their father to explode with rage, Hossein and Mahmoud held their breath. Then, after a brief silence, Hossein reminded Khodayar about his oldest son, Mohammad, who had died in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War. “Do you remember when you wrote those letters to my brother to give him strength?” Hossein asked his father.

“My son never read them,” Khodayar replied, crying at the memory that his letters hadn't reached Mohammad before his death. “He never heard my voice.”

Hossein hugged his father. “But now you have this opportunity to read God's letter to you and to hear *His* voice,” he said.

Despite an intense fear of punishment from Allah, Khodayar agreed to read the Bible — at least a little bit of it. But he

► Many Muslims in Iran are turning to Christ through the courageous efforts of Christians who risk distributing Bibles in open areas like public parks and on the streets.



“That night, all my fear was replaced by trust. I was certain that these were God’s words — a letter from a father to his son.”

told himself that he would just take a quick look, because he still considered the Quran his holy book.

A Revelation

One of the first things Khodayar read about Jesus was how He restored sight to the blind. But he had a hard time believing that Jesus, if he were really God as Christians claimed, could be both all-powerful and all-loving. Khodayar had always viewed Allah as authoritarian and had even blamed him for taking his oldest son.

When Khodayar eventually read John 10, in which Jesus describes Himself as “the good shepherd” whose sheep “follow him, for they know his voice,” he was reminded of his own childhood as a nomadic shepherd.

He remembered how deeply he cared for the sheep in his flock and how he slept in their pen when they were sick or injured. He recalled how the sheep in his care followed him wherever he went and could find their way to him even when they were lost among hundreds of other sheep.

Thinking of Jesus Christ as his “good shepherd” helped Khodayar understand that Jesus loved him immensely, even more than he had loved his own sheep. In that moment, he saw God in a new light.

“That night, all my fear was replaced by trust,” Khodayar said. “I was certain that these were God’s words — a letter from a father to his son, a letter to the lost sheep that is seeking a secure home. That night, God brought peace to my heart and I started talking to Him.”

Khodayar felt as if God had reassured him that He didn’t take his son, Mohammad, but had sacrificed *His* only son to have a relationship with Khodayar and his family. “Since then, the sorrow of losing my son has turned into a pleasant feeling of missing him with abundant love,” Khodayar said. “If there is one God, this is who He is, and I believe in Him.”

Revealing Secrets

One morning as Hossein and Mahmoud were eating breakfast in the kitchen, their father walked in and placed his Bible on the table. “This is God’s Word,” Khodayar said. Then, after telling his sons

that he had placed his faith in Christ, he urged them to read the book carefully for themselves.

Feeling a new sense of safety with his father, Hossein began to talk openly about the Bible and his own love for Christ.

“I was so surprised,” Khodayar said, “by Hossein’s knowledge and found out that he had been visiting home churches for a long time. After that, Mahmoud admitted that he had also come to Christ. That day, I realized that God had entered our house long ago but that I hadn’t been able to hear His voice. Now I can.”

Days later, the boys’ sister approached Mahmoud and asked how she could come to know the God who had healed their mother and given their father peace. One by one, each family member came to faith in Christ — all through the gift of God’s Word.

“We really saw the power of God,” Mahmoud said, “that every knee will bow before Him and every tongue will confess that He is the true God.” ●



◀ Iranian Christians boldly and creatively share God’s Word despite constant risk of arrest and imprisonment for owning a Bible or even talking about Christ. You can learn more about the current need for Bibles in Iran and be inspired by the testimonies of those taking such necessary risks by listening to the VOM Radio episode “Iran: Church Needs More Bibles.”

To hear the full episode, including information from a Christian worker who oversees Bible distribution in Iran, visit VOMRadio.net/Omid.



The Ultimate CONTRABAND

Driven to a life of smuggling, North Koreans encounter God's Word with fear followed by joy.

Eun-Ji was a smuggler by necessity. In the mid-1990s, North Korea suffered a series of catastrophic floods that wiped out crops and farmland. Effects of the natural disaster were compounded by the totalitarian regime's adherence to a philosophy of self-reliance that limited imports, foreign investments and international aid, resulting in starvation for hundreds of thousands of North Koreans.

During the "March of Suffering," as these years of famine are called, the average North Korean, specifically those not in the military or part of the Workers' Party elite, had a choice to make: Remain a law-abiding citizen and die waiting for rations, or engage in smuggling or other illegal activities and hope to survive. Eun-Ji, who was desperate to stay alive and support her family, opted for the second choice. She became a smuggler.

Smuggling, however, came with great risk. While border police and customs officials on both sides of the North

Korea–China border could sometimes be bribed to look the other way, it wasn't a certainty, and penalties could range from stiff fines to imprisonment in a labour camp. In addition, the river crossing, terrain and weather could be treacherous, as could the unscrupulous suppliers on one side and potential informers in every neighbourhood on the other side.

With no alternative, Eun-Ji accepted the dangers and began crossing the border into China, where she had relatives who would help her. During her time there, she became acquainted with some Korean Christians who invited her to a Sunday worship service. At first, Eun-Ji was disgusted at how unpatriotic the service was; she had been taught her whole life that North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung, and his family should be the only focus of adoration and praise. But she stayed.

The church gave rice to Eun-Ji and others like her to share with their families in North Korea, so she returned to the church each time she came to China

to pick up more goods to smuggle. Gradually, she began to learn about Christianity and take a deeper interest. And over time, she received discipleship training and learned how to disciple others so she could share the Gospel with her friends and family back home.

But soon, she had another decision to make: Would she accept the extreme risk of smuggling Bibles into North Korea?

Bibles are the ultimate contraband in North Korea. Getting caught smuggling Bibles into the country almost certainly leads to arrest, imprisonment or even execution. Those convicted of smuggling or possessing other items of contraband can often receive a reduced sentence or avoid punishment entirely by offering a bribe. But, according to many North Koreans, harsh sentences are unavoidable for merely possessing a Bible.

Another smuggler who came to know Christ after defecting from North Korea, Dan-Bi, was warned by fellow smugglers about the severe consequences of being

caught with a Bible. They told her that one man caught crossing the border with a Bible didn't even get a chance to bribe his captors. He was summarily sentenced to imprisonment in a concentration camp known as *Kwanliso*, where conditions are so bad that nearly 40% of inmates die of starvation.

Propaganda against religion and the Bible is so pervasive in North Korea that even a mention of the Bible can elicit extreme fear. "When I first received this thing called the Bible, I was very terrified and suffered," said a North Korean Christian who received God's Word while working abroad. "I thought I finally was caught by the hand of evil. I even thought to report this person who delivered it to me to the authorities."

Ultimately, Eun-Ji decided to accept the risk and smuggle Bibles back into North Korea. When preparing for each trip, she filled her pack with rice and buried a single Bible in the middle of it. After each successful crossing, she added the new Bible to a growing stack in her home. Knowing that if she were caught with the Bibles she could face imprisonment or


execution, she began to worry about what to do with the Bibles. For the safety of both herself and the Bibles, she decided to wrap them in vinyl and bury them in her yard.

Eun-Ji knew that she might not be able to share her precious but dangerous contraband for a long time, but, slowly and carefully, she began to share what she had learned about Jesus Christ with trusted family members who came to her for food. Even distributing the food required caution, as North Koreans are rewarded for reporting on neighbours who break the law. So Eun-Ji waited patiently, the Bibles hidden only steps away, to give God's Word to anyone who demonstrated a sustained interest in receiving salvation through faith in Christ.

Eun-Ji and her family eventually defected to South Korea. And she thinks the Bibles may still be buried in the yard of her former home, waiting to be discovered

by another North Korean hungry for the grace and hope of the Gospel.

Though she wasn't able to distribute the Bibles before fleeing her country, Eun-Ji and many other North Koreans have discovered the life-giving importance of God's Word for those hungry for the truth. The North Korean Believer who was at first terrified by the Bible he received, is a testimony to its transforming power. "I am not worried about it anymore," he said. "If I die here, am I not going to the place called heaven because of faith? I only have this mind, that I want my beloved family and friends to go to heaven, not hell, so that I need to share it with my people around me. I am giving thanks to God for letting me become who I am now." ●



North Koreans live under a communist-inspired dictatorship founded on Juche, a North Korean religious ideology that requires worship of and subservience to the Kim family.

UGANDA: New Christians Receive Vocational Training

In Uganda, thousands of Christian converts from Islam have been shunned by their communities and are unable to work in their former jobs. Front-Line Workers are providing job training to support these new Christians.

More than 200 Believers graduated recently from vocational training programmes in sewing, cooking, barbering and metalworking. Upon completion of the training, each graduate was given a diploma and the equipment needed to start his or her own business. Supplies donated for the various programmes included sewing machines, pots and kettles, barbering supplies and welding tools.

Describing the pressures he has faced as a new follower of



▲ More than 200 Ugandan Christians recently graduated from vocational training programmes that taught sewing, cooking, barbering and metalworking.

Christ, one graduate said, "Since I converted to Christianity, Muslims have been mocking me and belittling me for forsaking family and its benefits."

After receiving his graduation certificate for training in welding and metal fabrication, he said, "Today, I have just achieved a great step in my life. I will make every effort to live a better life with this skill and bring joy to my God. I pledge to train at least three other former Muslims. Thank you so much for equipping us."

Another graduate, from the tailoring programme, said, "Life was hard, and the church cannot meet all our needs because there are a lot of demands from many people. With this skill, you have invested greatly in all of us. May the Lord bless you and help us to be a blessing to others."

TURKEY: Teen Badly Beaten for Wearing a Cross

When 16-year-old Hakim and his family left Islam to become followers of Christ, they faced severe persecution in their home country of Iraq. Fearing for their lives, they fled to Turkey, where they now live as refugees and can worship with other Christian converts from Islam with relative freedom.

Turkey has the world's largest population of refugees, many of whom fled the decade-long civil war in Syria. But some refugees, like Hakim's family, come from neighbouring countries that are hostile to their faith. And the persecution doesn't necessarily stop for Christian refugees in Türkiye.

While walking down the street recently, Hakim was confronted by a group of men who noticed the cross around his neck. They began to punch him and smashed one of his front teeth into his gums.

Hakim's family could not afford to treat Hakim's dental problem. So when a Front-Line Worker heard what happened to Hakim, VOM provided the funds for a permanent denture. After a dentist repaired the tooth, Hakim's pastor told the Front-Line Worker that Hakim and his family are grateful for the support they received.



▲ Though the Gospel spread throughout what is now Turkey in the first century, fewer than 1% of Turks are Christians. Most Turks today consider Islam to be a part of their national identity.



▲ More than 60% of Laotians consider themselves Buddhists, and Christians are often opposed by the Buddhist religious establishment.

LAOS: Persecution for Choosing a “Foreign” Religion

After hearing the Gospel from Christians in their village, two Laotian men, Linh and Keon, called a pastor to find out how to become Christians. Though afraid of the police and knowing that conversion could cause them great trouble, they accepted the pastor’s invitation to a Sunday worship service. After the service, the pastor further explained the Gospel to them and they placed their faith in Christ. While they were praying with the pastor, however, police officers arrived and saw what was happening.

The pastor was taken to the police station, interrogated, chastised for teaching a foreign religion and warned to stop. Then, two days later, police confronted Linh about his decision to follow Christ, threatening to take him to prison if he did not leave the Christian faith. But Linh stood firm and refused to recant his faith in Christ.

While more than 60% of Laotians consider themselves Buddhists, most practice a syncretistic version of Buddhism mixed with tribal animism. That is especially true among minority tribal groups, such as the one to which Linh and Keon belong.

Throughout Laos, the Christian faith is viewed as a foreign threat by both the Buddhist religious establishment and the Communist government. The central government restricts Christian activity, and followers of Christ are also persecuted by family members and village authorities concerned that Christians will offend the local spirits.

PAKISTAN: Christian Literature Seen as Threat to Islam

An evangelism team based in Peshawar, Pakistan, conducted outreach work in many cities of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) region in the summer of 2022, telling people about Christ and distributing Christian literature. The KPK region, located in the northwestern part of the country and sharing a border with Afghanistan, is the birthplace of al-Qaida and home to Islamic extremist groups like the Taliban.

When Islamic religious leaders discovered some of the Christian materials distributed during the outreach efforts, a meeting of Islamic religious legal scholars, called an *ulama*, was convened to organize against the evangelism. Historically, *ulamas* have exercised considerable power to interpret Islamic law and set precedents for how communities deal with perceived threats to Islamic faith and culture.

Because of Pakistan’s anti-blasphemy laws, Christians are at constant risk of being falsely accused of blaspheming Islam, the Quran or Mohammad, and they receive harsh punishments when convicted. Christians have been imprisoned for years under these laws, and many have been killed or forced to flee the country upon their release.

Since their outreach efforts, members of the evangelism team have received threatening calls. And after learning that the police were searching for them, they dispersed to other areas for their safety.



▲ Pakistani Christians are routinely threatened because of their evangelistic outreach efforts.

Prayer Diary

May/June 2023

MAY

S 14	INDIA	Pray for the growth of biblical disciples who will joyfully trust Christ amid persecution.
M 15	ALGERIA	Pray that young pastors receiving theological instruction will mature in faith.
T 16	ETHIOPIA	Pray that Christians will remain faithful despite attacks by religious groups opposed to the Gospel.
W 17	MALI	Pray for the strength of Christians in the north who face discrimination for following Christ.
T 18	TURKMENISTAN	Pray for the endurance of pastors and Christians who are isolated and must meet in secret.
F 19	AZERBAIJAN	Pray for the strength of Christ's followers as they remain faithful to Him.
S 20	CAMEROON	Pray that Christians from the north will be able to return home after fleeing violent conflicts.
S 21	KAZAKHSTAN	Pray for the growth of God's kingdom in Kazakhstan.
M 22	VIETNAM	Pray for Christians who have been denied utilities, schooling or medical care because of their faith.
T 23	PHILIPPINES	Praise God for the bold witness of Bible school graduates.
W 24	BRUNEI	Pray that Christians will find creative ways of reaching out to Sunni Muslims.
T 25	MYANMAR	Pray that God will soften the hearts of ethnic Burmese people and draw them to Himself.
F 26	INDONESIA	Pray for Christians in Indonesia, using Colossians 1:9-12 as a guide.
S 27	SUDAN	Pray for an effort to get 100,000 New Testaments to people hungry for God's Word.
S 28	BURKINA FASO	Pray for the health, well-being and faith of thousands of Christians living in refugee camps.
M 29	SYRIA	Pray for productive partnerships among denominational leaders working to advance God's kingdom.
T 30	CHINA	Pray that Christians will stand firmly for biblical truth amid governmental pressure.
W 31	COMOROS	Pray that Christians will find ways to meet for Bible study, which can result in imprisonment.

JUNE

T 1	ALGERIA	Pray for new church plants in remote areas of the country.
F 2	MALDIVES	Pray for evangelists sharing the Gospel with Maldivians in the Maldives, Sri Lanka and India.
S 3	EGYPT	Pray that God will supply the needs of new Christians fleeing persecution by family members.
S 4	ISRAEL	Pray for the success of new church plants.
M 5	KUWAIT	Pray that many Kuwaitis will read or hear the Gospel online.
T 6	PHILIPPINES	Pray for the witness of Christians who live among Muslim extremists and Communist rebels.
W 7	QATAR	Pray that Qatari Christians will find creative ways to meet for prayer and worship.
T 8	DJIBOUTI	Pray that Bibles will reach everyone who needs a copy.
F 9	CAR*	Pray for the many Christians who have witnessed unspeakable violence or lost loved ones.
S 10	MOROCCO	Pray that Christians will find ways to gather in secret, since no church buildings are allowed.
S 11	ERITREA	Pray that the body of Christ will enter into fellowship with Christians suffering for their faith.
M 12	PAKISTAN	Pray that Christians will experience love and acceptance through fellowship with other Believers.
T 13	MEXICO	Pray that Christians persecuted by Marxist and animist groups will remain faithful to Christ.
W 14	OMAN	Pray that the truth of God's Word will overcome the falsehoods of Islam.
T 15	LEBANON	Pray that young leaders will be trained and developed to lead churches in the future.
F 16	ETHIOPIA	Pray that Christians will thrive in discipleship groups.
S 17	BURKINA FASO	Pray that those forced to flee Islamist violence will be able to return home.

*CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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CMI | P. O. Box 7157, Primrose Hill, 1417 South Africa | Tel: 010 777 0114 (8am-1pm) | Cell: 076-022-3336 (8am-5pm)
E-pos: cmi@vomsa.org or bianca@vomsa.org | Website: www.persecutionsa.org | Facebook@cmivomsa | Instagram@cmi - vomsa

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