



THE Voice OF THE Martyrs

June 2024

A NEW MINISTRY ASSIGNMENT

16 YEARS IN AN
ERITRAEN PRISON



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

With Them in Prison

Hebrews 13:3 implores us to remember Christians imprisoned for Christ's sake as though we were in prison with them. This kind of remembrance engages our imaginations, requiring us to think of ourselves as being in their cells. But it is a difficult task because it is neither natural nor normal for us to do such a thing. We have no inclination to imagine ourselves locked away from sunlight and fresh air, tortured and abused, with meagre rations and no privacy — tempted to despair and with no idea when or if the imprisonment will end.

This month marks 20 years since the arrests of two of our Eritrean Christian family members, Kiflu Gebremeskel and Haile Nayzgi. After two decades of imprisonment for Christ's sake, neither they nor their family members have any idea when or if they will be released. As you contemplate their plight, I know that you will feel sometimes angry or sorrowful. When I think of them, I become overwhelmed and can only pray until the Lord turns my frustration

into tears. Though difficult, bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) and weeping with those who weep (Romans 12:15) are the only ways we can walk out the reality of Christ's prayer that all those who believe on His name will come to complete unity (John 17:20–23). Entering into their suffering is what it means for us to be, with them, part of God's eternal family.

God tells us, through his Word, to remember the sufferings of our Christian brothers and sisters, but thankfully we are not left to do it alone. Along with imprisoned Christians, we are the sons and daughters of a heavenly Father who entreats us to bring our troubles to Him. And when we do, He performs a miracle in our hearts and minds by enabling us to walk in faith with His peace in our hearts, free from worry, doubt and fear.

In the following pages, you will read the story of another long-term prisoner of faith in Eritrea, Twen Theodros. Twen was released on the

morning of 12 September 2020. One of our previous newsletters, featured stories of those imprisoned for their faith. When we shared about Twen for that issue, we had no idea that after 16 years in prison, she would be released because Christians around the world would pray for her.

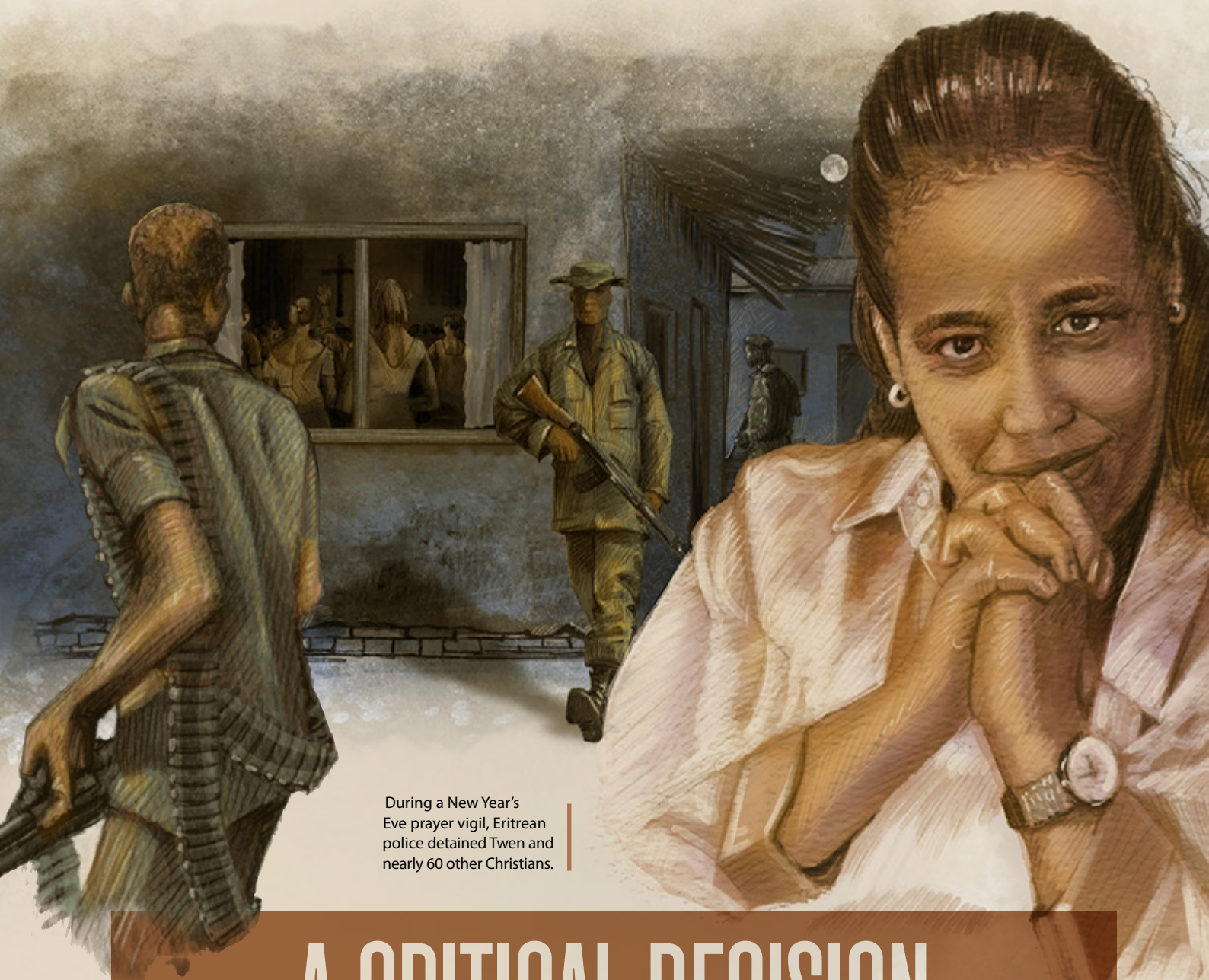
In light of Twen's experience, may God use this newsletter and your prayers to effect the release of Kiflu and Haile? We have no idea how or when God will move to release His prisoners of faith; He alone is sovereign over such things (Proverbs 21:1) and His ways are higher than ours. We, His children, must walk in faith and simple obedience. Let us do this together: **Will you join us in prayer for Kiflu and Haile as we "remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them"?**

Ashley



But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel; So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places; And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

—The Apostle Paul, in Philippians 1:12–14



During a New Year's Eve prayer vigil, Eritrean police detained Twen and nearly 60 other Christians.

A CRITICAL DECISION

How counting the cost helped Twen Theodros endure 16 years in an Eritrean prison.

Twen Theodros had been a Christian for only two years when she was arrested in Eritrea the first time.

In 2002, the country's dictatorship outlawed every religious group except Sunni Islam, the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea. The government maintains tight control over these groups and their messages, and unapproved churches must meet secretly.

In February 2004, Twen, then 20, had just finished her mandatory military training and been assigned to work in

Asmara, Eritrea's capital. Around that time, she visited a house-church to worship with other Christians in secret.

Eritrean authorities, however, who actively infiltrate secret churches, discovered the worship meeting at the house-church and arrested the Believers one day as they left the gathering.

After spending the next month in prison, Twen was tricked into signing a document upon her release. Her father begged her to sign the document; he and the prison official both assured her that she was merely acknowledging that she could not preach in or attend a large church but could still preach

to small groups. But when Twen returned to her military post and gave her supervisor a letter from the prison, she learned that she had unwittingly agreed to return to the government-approved religious group to which she formerly belonged.

"I went home and started to cry and ask for forgiveness, repent," she said. As she prayed, Revelation 3:16 came to mind: *"So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."*

The verse helped Twen realize she had to fully commit herself to Christ or stop calling herself a Christian. She could either obey God's Word or the letter she had signed. Kneeling beside her bed, she placed a Bible in front of her and imagined the letter she had signed resting beside it. "I asked my soul to choose one," she said.

"Are you ready to forsake your father, your mother, your siblings, your job and your life?" she asked herself, thinking of Luke 14:26–33. As she considered the Scripture passage, she answered, "I am ready." Still, it was painful to choose the Lord over her job, family and life. "I am willing and willing and willing," she repeated in affirmation.

After committing to live according to God's Word, Twen said she felt at peace. "I felt joy in my heart," she said. Her commitment proved crucial in helping her endure the next 16 years of her life.

Second Arrest

Eight months after her first arrest, while Twen and about 60 other Christians were observing a New Year's Eve prayer vigil, police surrounded their house and detained everyone inside. Twen said she recalled Philippians 1:29 — *"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake."*

Twen and the other Christians were taken to Mai Serwa prison, near Asmara, where they were locked in steel shipping containers. Conditions in these "prisons," which are still used in Eritrea today, are some of the harshest in the world. During the day, Twen said, the heat became unbearable, and at night everyone struggled to stay warm. Prisoners received only lentil soup, bread and tea, along with a limited amount of water to drink.

While in prison, Twen became close friends with Helen Berhane, an Eritrean Gospel singer who had been held in a shipping container since February 2004. Helen helped Twen cope with her new circumstances. But when Helen was released in October 2006 following a severe illness, guards isolated Twen to prevent her from witnessing to other inmates. "I was on my own," Twen said. "It was really hard for me."

During the day, the guards shut the small window on Twen's shipping container, preventing fresh air from flowing inside. The goal was to break Twen's resolve and force her to sign another document stating that she had renounced her faith.

At around noon one day, Twen began suffering shortness of breath from the stifling heat that had built up in the container. "I struggled to survive," she said. "It was beyond my ability; it was too much for me. I started to pray, 'God, please help me.'"

Her prayer was answered in the form of another recalled passage of Scripture, 1 Peter 4:12–13. *"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be*

revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy."

Twen realized that her fiery trial was simply part of following Christ, and she accepted the possibility that it could lead to her death. "In one way," she said, "I was happy because I would go to glory. In the other way, the suffering was painful. While I was thinking about this, that verse gave me comfort and I started to feel like cool fresh air. I could see the presence of the Holy Spirit, and I started to praise God."

Three hours later, guards opened the door expecting to find Twen near death and desperate to sign the document. "I could see from their faces when they saw me alive that they were surprised," Twen said. But she knew their goal was to persuade her to recant her faith rather than to kill her.

Suddenly, after two years and 10 months locked in the shipping container, mostly in isolation, Twen was transferred to another prison. "I felt great joy because when they took me to the other place I joined with other Christian sisters," she said. "I felt as if I was getting released, so I praised God."

Joining in Christ's Sufferings

In Wi'a Prison, located on the Red Sea coast, where temperatures can climb above 38 degrees Celsius, Twen and other Christians were thrown into an underground cell — a hand-dug pit with walls made of stone. The guards tried to get the Christians there to renounce their faith. "They tried to scare us with warnings that unless we renounce our faith, we would suffer this or that," Twen said, "but our position was to be faithful even to death."

▼ Twen spent three years of her 16-year sentence locked in a steel shipping container. During that time, she met and was encouraged by Eritrean Gospel singer Helen Berhane.



“It was too much. I started to cry, ‘Please, Lord, don’t test me beyond what I can endure.’”

In time, the guards grew impatient and changed tactics. They began beating and whipping the women, providing only bread and one cup of water a day. But Twen and her cellmates remained firm in their faith, and Twen never wavered from the commitment she had made to God in 2004.

The guards’ torturous methods continued to evolve until, eventually, they forced the women to walk across the thorny ground under the scorching desert sun. “Then they made us lie on the ground, and they started to beat us hard,” Twen said. “They were beating one area on the shoulders, and they beat the same place again and again to cause maximum pain.”

At the end of the beating, the guards ordered the women to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ.

One of the guards told Twen he would give her a few minutes to think about her answer, and then walked away. When he returned, Twen’s resolute faith made him even angrier. She had already made up her mind before being sent to prison that Christ is her life.

“Christ gave me His life,” she told the guard, “so to give Him my life is a small thing. As Scripture says, *‘Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.’* (Revelation 2:10). I already gave my life to Him.”

“We respected you,” the guard replied, “but you don’t deserve respect. Lie down! Lie down!”

He then beat Twen on the back repeatedly with as much force as he could muster. “It was too much,” Twen said. “I started to cry, ‘Please, Lord, don’t test me beyond what I can endure.’”

Twen began to think about Christ’s suffering for her on the cross, and she felt humbled to join Him in that suffering. As she sensed God’s grace washing over her, she said she started to feel compassion toward the guard, even as he beat her. “Please forgive them, for they do not

know what they are doing,” she prayed, recalling the words of Christ on the cross.

Soon, a new guard took over, relieving the others of their duties. This man, also a soldier, had a big stick with him. “He was just told to look after us, not to torture us,” Twen said.

But the new guard continued to beat the other women at random with the stick.

As Twen prayed, she saw a vision of a man holding a child. The man, she said, looked like Jesus, and He was holding a young girl in His arms to protect her from sticks falling all around her. All the while, the child sat peacefully in His arms, touching His hair and smiling.

The next night, Twen was taken to be tortured. “I felt like all the sticks were falling on me,” she explained, “but I realized they were falling on Jesus as seen in my vision. It was Him who was taking the beating and who was suffering. Seeing that is how I got strength in my heart.”

Instead of asking God to release her or to sustain her health, Twen prayed that He would help her remain faithful. She said she was reminded of 1 Corinthians 6:19–20, which tells us we are purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ and are not our own.

“In the Scriptures, He never promises us that we won’t suffer,” Twen said. “I don’t belong to myself; I belong to God. He can take me wherever He wants me. I am just there to fulfill His will, not my own will.”

A few weeks later, the beatings resumed, but the guards didn’t restrict it to just one part of her body. As the intense pain caused her to drift in and out of consciousness, she experienced another vision.

“I could see the stars getting bigger and bigger,” she said, “and I started to hear very pleasant music — an angel’s song — and felt fresh air.” Then she opened her eyes.

“I could see the man torturing me,” she said. “I could see his anger. He was studying me. I was very sad to be brought back from that taste of heaven. I asked God, ‘Why?’ I always remember that time.” Twen said the guards had hoped to use her disorientation to get her to renounce her faith.

That same night, Twen learned that the guards weren’t the only source of fear and suffering she might face. She and a friend were lying in the dark underground pit when Twen, in a semiconscious state, suddenly felt something sting her foot. Her friend lit a match, providing enough light for them to see a snake coiled by Twen’s foot. The friend then killed the snake with a nearby broom.

About 10 minutes later, after again losing consciousness, the women were awakened by a noise: This time, a cobra and two other snakes were dragging the body of the dead snake across the floor. Twen’s friend killed two of the snakes, but the cobra slithered toward an opening in the stone wall, hissing.

When a guard who had heard the commotion opened the door and shined his flashlight on the cobra, Twen and the women asked him for help. But the guard, shaking with fear, instead left them his flashlight and baton before leaving the underground cell and locking the door behind him. Twen’s friend began to recite 1 Samuel 17:46a, where David tells Goliath, *“This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee;”*.

“When we started to say these words again and again, we started to get strength,” Twen said. “We said to the cobra, ‘Today, you are coming with your anger and are hissing, but we come against you in the name of the Lord, and God is going to hand your head to us.’”

The same friend who had killed the other snakes struck the cobra on the



head. And as it retreated into a tight coil, Twen pinned it against the wall with a stick while her friend beat it to death with another stick.

Soon after that incident, the beatings and torture stopped.

A Break from the Pain

After spending nearly six years in prison, Twen was allowed to leave temporarily to see a doctor for an eye condition. When the treatment required a second appointment, a friend persuaded prison officials to let Twen remain out of prison until the appointment.

While Twen was out of prison, her parents tried to get her to sign a document renouncing her faith. One day, they brought a church leader with them to help persuade Twen. Using the story in Genesis 20 in which Abraham misleads Abimelech about his wife, Sarah, to avoid being killed, the church leader told Twen

that she needed to be wise like Abraham.

The church leader's interpretation of the verse angered Twen. "It's not good to twist the Word of God!" she told him. Surprised by her anger, the church leader apologized and abruptly ended the conversation.

One month later, after her second medical appointment, Twen decided to return to prison. She knew that if she failed to return, others would be persecuted by the authorities. "How can I take the risk of seeing others suffer because of me?" she thought.

After a tearful parting with family members, Twen returned to prison, where she remained for 10 more years. During that time, she clung to her hope in Christ. "I didn't know when I was going to be released," she said. "I was waiting for God's timing; I was praying to remain faithful until that day happens."

Shouting for Joy

On the morning of 8 September, 2020, Twen woke up early because it was her turn to cook breakfast for the other prisoners. After breakfast, one of the chiefs called Twen's name, and she soon learned that she was being released after spending 16 years in prison.

"Everybody was shouting for joy," she said.

Following her release, Twen moved in with her mother and began the process of emotional and physical healing. A year and a half later, she developed pneumonia, her time in prison likely contributing to a weakened immune system.

Twen soon realized how much she had missed while in prison. She had lost precious time with her father, who had died two years before her release. But despite all of her sacrifices, she said her



▲ Today, Twen considers her years of imprisonment a joyful and profitable time in her life.

future with Christ more than makes up for it.

"I always try to compare eternity with this short period of our life on earth," she said. "We are really here for only 70 or 80 years in this world. I believe Christ is bigger than anything. He is good to me and everything I need, but God does things in His own time. The thing for me is to live for Christ."

Twen initially found life outside prison difficult, seeing anew how people are consumed with working, studying and earning money. She prays for wisdom to have a balanced life.

While she admits that remaining faithful to Christ was at times difficult in prison, Twen said she could at least clearly see the enemy at work. "When you are out, you don't see the work of the enemy so clearly," she explained. "There are a lot of things that distract. We need more grace because we have a lot of something that looks good, but it distracts us from the work of God. We need to be vigilant."

Today, more than 200 Christians are known to be in Eritrean prisons, including several top church leaders. Some of those in prison were arrested in 2004, the same year as Twen's second arrest, and many of their families are unsure if their loved ones are still alive.

Reflecting on her own years of imprisonment, Twen said she is grateful for everything she gained through

suffering. "Even if it is a difficult time of my life, I think like Peter and John, as they were counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. I feel joy when I remember my time in prison," she said referencing Acts 5:41.

She also understands the importance of counting the cost of a commitment to Christ, such as the one she made in 2004 after her first arrest. "That decision took me through the 16 years of suffering," she said.

Because of the likelihood of rearrest, she ultimately chose to leave Eritrea and settle in a new country. Twen said she prays that she will always live out her faith with the same passion and boldness she had during her imprisonment.

"Continue to pray for Eritrea and the persecuted in Eritrea," she said, "that my brothers and sisters would be encouraged in their faith and be faithful to see beyond the situation, to see Jesus in His glory." ■

STONES of Remembrance

By Sabina Wurmbrand



God works miracles every day. It is a miracle to hear the Word of God, to arise in the morning to see the sun, to see your dear ones. But we take many of these things for granted. We forget that every minute of our life is a miracle, a gift from God. God wants us to see miracles.

As the children of Israel were about to enter the land of promise after their 40-year wilderness journey, which was filled with God's miraculous provision, God said to Joshua, *"Take you hence out of the midst of Jordan ... twelve stones ... and leave them in the lodging place, where ye shall lodge this night."* (Joshua 4:3).

God wants us to see the stones of remembrance and remember His miracles (Joshua 4:6–7).

I once met a Christian lady who was exiled to Siberia with her five children for 12 years. Siberia is cold, and it was very hard for her to find bread for her children. One morning when she had nothing for them to eat, she sat near her children and told them about the prophet Elijah, who was fed by ravens (1 Kings 17:1–7).

Then she said, "Now I go. I don't know where, but I go. Pray that God may give us something to eat today." She left in the cold to look for some bread.

In the meantime, the children talked more about the prophet Elijah. "There were some birds who brought bread and flesh," they said. "Let us open the door. Perhaps God will send some birds to bring us a little bit of bread today."

Despite the cold, the children opened the door, waiting for the birds. When a passerby saw the door open to the cold, he entered and asked the children, "Where is your mother? Why do you have the door open when it is so cold?"

Crying, the children told him, "We didn't eat yesterday, and we have nothing today. Mommy told us about the birds, so we opened the door, waiting for God to send in the birds."

Hearing about the miracle that God had done for Elijah, the man, who was not a Christian, said, "Children, I am the bird sent by God. I will take care of you." He cared for this family every day. The stone of remembrance (the story of Elijah) that the children had heard from their mother ultimately saved their lives and saved the soul of this man, who later became a Christian.

Stones of remembrance are declarations of God's miracles that should prompt us and others to give Him praise. Standing before you as a living stone, I witness before heaven and earth that in the darkest days of my imprisonment, Jesus was there as a faithful friend, a great helper, a light in the darkness, a most wonderful Lord. Don't be afraid of your problems. Don't be afraid of the world, because our Lord is greater. Bring your problems before Him, and you will see His mighty arm. Trust in Him, love Him, give Him praise, and tell those who are near you about His wonderful miracles in the lives of those who love Him. ■

Sabina Wurmbrand (1913 – 2000) and her husband, Richard (1909 – 2001), co-founded The Voice of the Martyrs. Her inspiring story is told in the film Sabina: Tortured for Christ, the Nazi Years. Visit SabinaMovie.com to learn more.



CHINA

Church Members Harassed on Anniversary of Crackdown

In December 2023, the fifth anniversary of the December 2018 crackdown on Early Rain Covenant Church, government authorities harassed more than a dozen Early Rain church families.

“Guards” were stationed outside the homes of some church leaders to prevent them from leaving, and one deacon was detained for 15 days at the Shuangnan Police Station. Church members lost contact with the deacon on 8 December and had no idea what had happened to him.

In addition, one of the church’s pastors, Dai Shichao, was questioned and criminally detained under a charge of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.” And, after being warned on 8 December not to go online, Elder Li Yingqiang and his wife were detained for several hours the following day. The elder was again detained and interrogated on 15 and 19 December, for his participation in an online event commemorating the anniversary of the 2018 crackdown.

Elder Li distributed a letter on 19 December, 2023, requesting prayer as Early Rain Covenant Church continues to face various challenges internally and externally.



Chinese authorities have harassed Elder Li Yingqiang and his family since the December 2018 crackdown on Early Rain Covenant Church.

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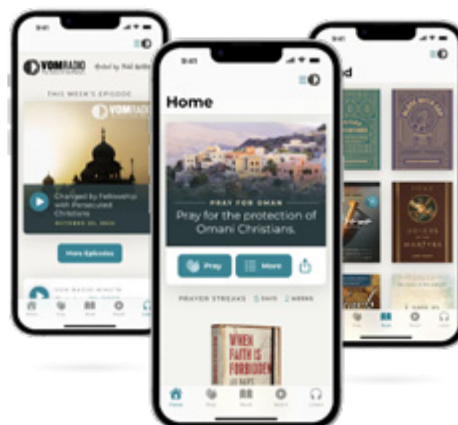


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Prayer Diary

June/July 2024

JUNE 2024

S	16	VIETNAM	Pray for Christians whose identification documents have been confiscated by government officials.
M	17	SRI LANKA	Pray for the family of Kalithas as they mourn his death and continue his work after his martyrdom.
T	18	MALAYSIA	Pray that Malay Christians will have opportunities for fellowship and discipleship.
W	19	SAUDI ARABIA	Praise God that many Saudis are accessing God's Word through the internet and other digital media!
T	20	MALI	Pray for pastors who were forced to leave an area after receiving death threats for actively sharing their faith.
F	21	KYRGYZSTAN	Bibles are available but expensive. Pray that Bible distributions will get more copies into the hands of Believers.
S	22	SUDAN	Pray that a recent shipment of 40,000 Bibles will be safely distributed to Christians who need them.
S	23	BHUTAN	Pray that Bhutan's king, currently the defender of the Buddhist faith, will bend his knee to the King of kings.
M	24	TAJIKISTAN	Pray for the health of Tamara, a widow whose husband was killed for his Christian witness.
T	25	COLOMBIA	Pray for churches that are working to prevent teenage girls and boys from joining guerrilla or paramilitary groups.
W	26	NIGER	Pray for the safety of Front-Line Workers who use motorcycles to reach people in remote desert areas.
T	27	INDONESIA	Pray that Christians like Nia, whose family pressured her to recant, will stand firm in Christ.
F	28	ERITREA	Praise God for the growth of Christ's body despite hardships and restrictions placed on the church.
S	29	YEMEN	Pray for God's blessing on forms of media that are leading Yemenis to Christ.
S	30	CUBA	Pray for a pastor who boldly defies authorities who regularly pressure her to stop her church activities.

JULY 2024

M	1	PAKISTAN	Pray for an evangelism team that was harassed after an outreach in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region.
T	2	UGANDA	Pray that Islamists who are persecuting Christians will repent and turn to Christ.
W	3	SOUTHERN MEXICO	Pray for God's favour on displaced families who are returning to their villages to preach the Gospel.
T	4	NORTH KOREA	Pray for Dylan Kim's father who is imprisoned in North Korea because of his missionary work.
F	5	INDIA	Pray for new Christians who face pressure from family members to return to Hinduism.
S	6	TURKEY	Praise God for Nurettin who placed his faith in Christ soon after receiving a Bible!
S	7	NIGERIA	Pray for the safe return of Christians who have been abducted by Islamists.
M	8	BRUNEI	Pray for creative ways to reach Muslims. The penalty for sharing the Gospel with them is a \$15,000 fine, prison or both.
T	9	LIBYA	Pray that the country's insecurity will cause Libyans to seek the stability found only in Christ (Isaiah 33:6).
W	10	PHILIPPINES	Pray that several new Christians on the predominantly Muslim island of Mindanao will stand firm amid persecution.
T	11	NEPAL	Pray that anti-conversion laws and other restrictions will not silence Christians or hamper their ministry work.
F	12	MOROCCO	Pray that Christians who have been imprisoned for sharing their faith will continue to be bold witnesses behind bars.
S	13	ISRAEL	Pray for Christian converts from Islam who face family and government persecution.

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