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When I met Ali and Zahra, I saw a couple filled with love and hope.

Jesus has changed their lives, and they’ll tell anyone who will listen how it happened. Their testimonies are inspiring and miraculous. Ali and Zahra are living reminders that Jesus is at work and that His joy and hope are available to all.

But of course their story cannot be that simple—because they’re from Iran.

Their story of Christ’s victory is also the story of heartbreak and the loss of almost everything they loved. It’s also the story of how religious persecution makes absolutely no sense.

“[Becoming a Christian] was a betrayal to country, parents and the religion you grew up with,” Zahra told me. Ali lost his job, their kids were taken out of school, and their families and friends would have nothing to do with them. All of this because they follow Jesus.

I met the two of them in Turkey, where they were forced to flee with their two sons. Their beautiful family represents something I find so starkly unjust about religious persecution: They are exactly the kind of people any society should want to have in their community.

For much of their marriage, Ali was a drug addict. Zahra was so depressed that she used to be forced to hide her tears from her sons. She knew they didn’t have enough money to support their family because Ali spent it all on drugs. He would disappear to the park with his friends, where he would shoot up and neglect Zahra and their kids.

But this didn’t mean they were targeted by the Iranian secret police. As a regular user, Ali kept his job, and his kids could go to school. Even though she could barely function, Zahra’s depression didn’t dissuade her family from inviting her over. They had friends and, at some level, social status.

But when Ali had a vision of Jesus, everything changed. He had been using drugs and wanted to die—and then Jesus healed him. (Read more of their amazing story on pg. 12.) He was a changed man, and his relationship with his Savior changed Zahra’s life as well. They are a joyful couple, filled with hope and easy with laughter.

And yet this was the point at which their lives in Iran were made completely miserable. A recovered drug addict and a wife with a newfound lease on life—both rejected by their government and their community, just because they follow Jesus.

This is the illogical and unjust insanity of religious persecution. This couple should have been celebrated for the life changes they made! And yet, simply because their motivation was outside the dominant religion, they lost everything and were forced to go to a country where they never wanted to live.

Fortunately, Ali and Zahra serve a compassionate and powerful God that does not ever leave us lost or hopeless. Though their lives in Turkey are not easy, they still serve God and lead a church for other Iranians who have had to flee. And though Iran didn’t want them, they pray for Iran—even the guards who tortured them in prison. “I can say that I have forgiven them; I love them with all my heart,” Ali says. “As Jesus said on the cross, ‘They do not know what they do.’ The same is true for them. I have forgiven them, and I love them dearly. I want to tell them that Christ Jesus is the truth, and I did not find it—it found me. They can have it, too. We always pray for them.”

Ali and Zahra’s radical faith stands as an encouragement and a challenge to all of us. As we confront the chaos of countries that turn away Jesus followers who have so much to give, we’re reminded by Christians like Ali and Zahra that Jesus means belonging to a family bigger than any country or government.

“[Becoming a Christian] was a betrayal to country, parents and the religion you grew up with,” Zahra told me. Ali lost his job, their kids were taken out of school, and their families and friends would have nothing to do with them. All of this because they follow Jesus.

Open Doors USA President and CEO David Curry advocates on behalf of those who are persecuted for their Christian faith. He provides leadership to Open Doors in its vision to strengthen and equip Christians who live under extreme restrictions, while encouraging these believers to remain strong in their faith.
AID RUSHED TO THOUSANDS OF AFGHAN SECRET BELIEVERS

“Our situation is desperate. We don’t have food and no extra clothes. I feel alone and helpless.”

These are the words of Zabi*, a Christian refugee from Afghanistan who fled the country when the Taliban took control in August 2021. Open Doors’ partners in the region have talked to several refugees like Zabi who are on the run, in fear for their lives and their families.

The Taliban are searching for anyone who follows Jesus and will execute them “on the spot,” says one Afghan refugee.

Christians like Zabi are near the Afghan border with other refugees—and once again they are struggling to survive. Many refugees are in places hit hard by the pandemic and several waves of lockdowns. The situation is already extremely difficult, and weary and traumatized refugees receive little to no aid.

Thankfully, with your help, Open Doors partners have already provided for thousands of refugees, delivering Bibles, food, blankets, firewood, medicine, winter coats, shoes, socks and diapers, as well as trauma care and Christmas gifts.

And because of you, we are able to support the digging of three wells that will bring clean water.

One mother shared her gratitude: “Thank you for the Christmas gifts for our children, for the food, for the firewood and the coal you brought. Another gratitude is for Christian books and Bibles. The need for Christian materials is huge; we can’t buy such books here, so this is so in time.”

Through this provision, many Afghan refugees experienced the love of Jesus—maybe for the first time.

A local Muslim woman told one of our partners, “Nobody cared for us before... For the first time we feel care and love. Thank you. Now we can see that Christians are loving and sincere.”

God is still on the move in Afghanistan.

*Name changed to preserve security

MUSLIMS LEARN GOD’S WORD

“I KNOW THERE ARE PEOPLE PRAYING FOR US”

Recently, Iranian refugee Taher received messages from Christians around the world writing to encourage him and his family. Taher’s family left everything in Iran to escape to Turkey when Taher was arrested and imprisoned for leading a house church. Together, the family left their home, their jobs and community to flee to a place they didn’t know, where they now live as refugees with few rights.

The letters moved Taher and his family to tears. “As Christians from Iran, we are used to living an isolated life. After fleeing the country, I felt like a soldier who was left behind. But with these cards, I realize for the first time that I am connected to the worldwide Church. By sending us these cards, I know there are lots and lots of people praying for us. I pray for each person who wrote cards, that they will have peace and blessing on their life.”

“WHEN I SEE THESE CARDS ... I ALWAYS THOUGHT NO ONE WAS THINKING ABOUT US, NO ONE HAD US IN MIND.”

Jinara’s words reflect how God is using His church in Bangladesh. Because of your support, our local partners are leading adult literacy classes using the Bible to teach reading and writing.

“The classes, now being taught in more than 200 areas of the country, were initiated by local partners, responding to the large number of illiterate Bangladeshi people living in rural areas.

In 2021, these classes helped at least 3,000 adult Bangladeshi men and women learn to read and write—and many, like Jinara, have met their Savior.

Sumi is one teacher. She currently leads a class with 15 students who were once Muslim. Her village is predominantly Muslim, and she is hopeful that more people will come to know Christ through these classes. She dreams of building a local church in her village.

“I want to win the villagers by the words of God,” she says. “Someday all villagers will have salvation. They will worship and pray to the Lord. We were once Muslim, but when we met Jesus, everything changed, and we want the other Muslims to know the truth.”

Your support is strengthening Iranian Christian refugees like Taher.

Your support is keeping Afghan Christians alive.

Your support is bringing God’s Word to Muslims in Bangladesh.

Your support is strengthening Muslims learning God’s Word.
COLOMBIA
1,500 BELIEVERS RECEIVE FIRST BIBLES
Praise God! Because of your support and prayers, persecuted Christians in Colombia have their very own Bibles in their own language. They were overjoyed to receive them and immediately thanked God in prayer for their precious gifts.

Their beautiful prayer: “We want, Lord, that this Word becomes the guide of our path. It’s also the cause of our happiness. Lord, we want Your Word that we receive in our hands to be the constant voice of our conscience.”

Open Doors’ local partners delivered 1,500 Bibles to persecuted Christians in 15 regions throughout Colombia where Christians can’t access a Bible or don’t have the resources to buy one. Where they live, the church is persecuted by illegal armed groups that threaten Christians who lead the church and share the gospel. Delivering Bibles to these communities enables Christians to build and strengthen their faith—realizing that the worldwide Church is standing with them, and that they can count on our prayers.

Thank you for letting them know they’re not alone. Pray that the Word would be rooted deeply in these believers as they follow God’s lead and build His Church.

AFGHANISTAN
THE WORLD’S MOST DANGEROUS PLACE FOR CHRISTIANS
“The list has been circulated with our names on it. Since the takeover, Taliban house searches have become a regular occurrence.”
— Saad,* a secret believer in Afghanistan

“We can only meet our pastor in the dead of night, so no one can identify him or us.”
— Gulshan,* a Christian inside Afghanistan

For the first time in 20 years, Afghanistan replaced North Korea as the most dangerous place for Christians on the 2022 World Watch List. The country has often been a close second, but since the Taliban took over last August, conditions for Christians have rapidly deteriorated, as these Afghan believers show.

Because of the situation, Christians are either in hiding, dreading the knock on the door, or on the run, fleeing for their lives. For Christians inside Afghanistan, as well as Afghan refugees struggling to survive in a foreign land, persecution is a constant force they must live with and fight.

Saad’s wife Fatima reminds us that when we pray for our sisters and brothers, we “meet them in the throne room, where we can have communion.”

When Open Doors local partners heard what had happened, they visited Ang and his family and gave them rice, blankets and warm clothes. They also brought extra money for food and materials for their new home.

Pray with Ang and his family—your family—and many other families who lose their homes because they’ve chosen to follow Jesus.

VIETNAM
A NEW HOME FOR BANISHED FAMILY
The photo you see above shows the makeshift tent where a family of persecuted Christians is now living in North Vietnam.

When Ang and his family refused to renounce Christ in their village, an angry mob marched to their house that night, beat Ang and drove the wounded family out of their village.

With nothing but the clothes on their backs, the family left their home in frigid weather. A church member in another village offered a shelter space beside his house where they set up the tent.

“My oldest child is almost 2 years old, and the second is only 8 months old,” Ang says. “They did not allow us to take anything, not even blankets. It was seven degrees.”

When Open Doors local partners heard what had happened, they visited Ang and his family and gave them rice, blankets and warm clothes. They also brought extra money for food and materials for their new home.

Pray with Ang and his family—your family—and so many other families who lose their homes because they’ve chosen to follow Jesus.

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NIGERIA
EVERY TWO HOURS, A NIGERIAN CHRISTIAN DIES FOR FOLLOWING JESUS
Research for the 2022 World Watch List found that in 2021, more Christians were murdered for their faith in Nigeria than in any other country. The death toll once again makes Nigeria the world’s most violent place for Christians—for the second consecutive year.

“We can document that 4,650 Nigerian Christians were killed during the previous reporting period for the 2022 World Watch List List,” says Open Doors CEO David Curry. “Those are just the ones we know about and can report. They were tracked, targeted, raped, killed … because they were Christians.”

To put it in perspective, that’s an average of nearly 13 Christians each day—with Nigeria accounting for nearly 80% of Christian deaths worldwide.

Persecution in the world’s seventh-largest country is—simply put—brutally violent. In much of northern Nigeria and increasingly in the south, Christians live under constant threat of attack from Islamic extremist groups, like Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province and gangs of Muslim Fulani militants, as well as criminals who kidnap and murder with few consequences.

With each attack, the pain continues to impact the survivors. Pastor Jeremiah, whose church and village in northern Nigeria were attacked by Muslim Fulani militants, leans on prayer:

“We have cried to the government to intervene, but they have done nothing,” he shares. “We still pray for [the Fulani militants] to change their ways because some of them were forced into [attacking], while others had hardened their hearts to do this evil. But nothing is difficult for God.”

Please pray for God’s grace, comfort and strength on the lives of our brothers and sisters in Nigeria. By your prayers, we show we have not forgotten about them, and that we suffer with them.

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PAKISTAN
TWO CHURCH LEADERS GUNNED DOWN

In the same place as the 2013 attack on a Pakistan church that killed 92 people, two church leaders were recently gunned down after a Sunday worship service.

As the leaders started their car to leave, two assassins on a motorbike drove up beside them, opened fire and sped off.

A senior lay leader, who led worship at three area parishes for Anglican Church of Pakistan President Azad Marshall, was severely injured.

The attack was part of an uptick in attacks by Islamic extremist groups emboldened by the Taliban’s takeover.

In Uzbekistan, police actively seek to find and control any religious content that sustain them—makes it more unsafe for aggressive pursuit of Christians—and the Bibles, books, and accessories confiscated students’ phones, again searching classrooms.

Police officers and people in plain clothes invaded the house of a U.S. citizen, who had been living in Uzbekistan with his family. Authorities tore the home apart and his family were asleep. Authorities threatened a family of believers with arrest in a raid. The raid came at 5 a.m., when the house church pastor and his family were asleep. Authorities tore the home apart, smashed the furniture and broken all the windows.

In Uzbekistan, police actively seek to find and control any religious materials that don’t support Islam. This increasingly aggressive pursuit of Christians—and the Bibles, books, and Internet content that sustain them—makes it more unsafe for believers by the day.

UZBEKISTAN
SECRET POLICE INVADE CLASSROOMS

The raid came at 5 a.m., when the house church pastor and his family were asleep. Authorities tore the home apart searching for anything Christian. Then they moved on to the homes of other house church believers.

A few days later, the search moved to a high school. Police officers and people in plain clothes invaded the classrooms and confiscated students’ phones, again searching for religious content.

In Uzbekistan, police actively seek to find and control any religious materials that don’t support Islam. This increasingly aggressive pursuit of Christians—and the Bibles, books, and Internet content that sustain them—makes it more unsafe for believers by the day.

Please pray with these traumatized students. Pray that they have the courage to stand strong in their faith despite this frightening incident.

BANGLADESH
WHEN PERSECUTION COMES TO YOUR HOUSE

Imagine being the only Christians in your town—and attacked for your faith. Our partners recently shared about a violent mob attack on a Christian family in their home. The attack was part of an ongoing campaign of ill treatment, name-calling and abuse to drive out the Das family—a Christian family in the village who often shares about Jesus. The attack is one of many that reveals a widespread escalation against Christians in Muslim-dominant Bangladesh. Across the world, more than 360 million people face discrimination and persecution like this violence because they have chosen to leave the local religion and follow Christ.

To get inside, the mob climbed on the roof and cut holes in it. At one point, they grabbed Tarok’s young grandson Sujit and put a knife to his throat, repeating their demands for all the family’s valuables. They smashed anything they didn’t want and stole the nine goats the family raised for their income.

Tarok had been dreaming of buying a cow (a main source of income for a family in Bangladesh) by selling the goats, but that hope vanished with the attack.

“All my dreams are demolished,” he told our local partners. “My hope is finished. I have nothing.”

Open Doors local partners have been working with Tarok’s family to meet their needs and are regularly praying with them. They’ve asked us to join them in lifting this battered family to God.

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, ADVOCACY EFFORTS BY OPEN DOORS USA HAVE LED TO SOME AMAZING STORIES.

From a young Iraqi Christian telling the Vice President about ISIS attacks on his community to a survivor of Boko Haram in the Oval Office calling on the President to help people of faith in Nigeria, Open Doors has helped relay the cries of the persecuted to the highest levels of government and media.

We’ve also seen prisoners set free in countries we can’t talk about openly and government persecutors called out for trying to crush religious freedom.

Whenever God comes through like this, we love to rejoice and to pass on the news to our supporters. Yet there is another side to advocacy that isn’t often talked about, and that’s when advocacy doesn’t work.

Let me give an example. A few years ago, a group of nine “defectors” who had escaped North Korea with the help of missionaries found themselves trapped in Vietnam. They had hoped to reach safety in South Korea, not least because many of them, including children, had given their lives to Jesus during the long trek through the “underground railroad” that North Korean refugees must often travel.

Their case became public after Vietnamese authorities arrested them and began the process of deporting them back to North Korea via China. Many advocates spoke out, including large secular groups like Human Rights Watch, asking South Korea to intervene and accept the refugees. Our pleas were ignored, and China sent the refugees back. Although we couldn’t track what happened to each refugee, we know some ended up in North Korea’s notoriously deadly prison camp system.

There are, sadly, many similar examples. Christian human rights lawyers I met on my last visit to China have since “disappeared” or been given long prison sentences. Calls on Nigerian officials to stop the slaughter of Christians have frequently been ignored.

Efforts to convince lawmakers in Nepal and India to include religious freedom provisions in legislation were disregarded and in years since, those same laws have been used to arrest pastors and church leaders.

What does this mean for those engaged in advocacy?

First, it reminds us that, ultimately, we must trust God to take care of the eternal outcome. The North Koreans who gave their lives to Jesus will spend eternity with God, even if their time on Earth is more challenging than we could imagine.

Second, it convinces us never to cease in our efforts for the persecuted. We may not always succeed, but if we do not try, we guarantee failure.

Finally, these examples convince us that the need for advocates for the persecuted is greater than ever. There are countless people whose cries for help go unheard, yet only a precious few are willing to take action on their behalf. Every time we speak up, it gives hope to those who have none and increases our chance of success.

So rather than grow weary in doing good, let’s resolve never to cease in our prayers and advocacy for the persecuted, knowing that the full fruit of our efforts may not be understood until we have passed into eternity.

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Ali and Zahra have an obvious and playful bond, clearly a couple who’s been married for decades and gone through the years with love. Daniel, a 20-something in fashionable aviator sunglasses, is excited about his new apartment—the first time he’s lived away from his parents. Samuel is a teenager and spends a lot of his time trying to occupy the family computer so he can play PC games his parents don’t begin to understand.

It’s a normal family, happily throwing out the inside jokes and teasing asides that only close families can get away with.

But talk to them for a bit longer, and you start to sense that these four believers living in Turkey aren’t quite your average family.

None of them are able to work legally. They need police permission to travel more than a few miles from their home. They don’t speak fluent Turkish. They aren’t comfortable in Turkey and aren’t sure if they want to remain there.

When you discover the reason behind their current situation, everything clicks into place: Ali, Zahra, Samuel and Daniel were forced to flee their home in Iran, leaving behind their house, their family and everything they’d ever known.

All because they follow Jesus.

‘WITHOUT GOD’S POWER, YOU CANNOT TOLERATE IT’

The cost of discipleship in Iran—and how the hope of Jesus shines, no matter what

By Christopher Summers

Ali didn’t grow up as a Christian. Like most Iranians, he was raised in a Muslim family. But he also grew up in a family troubled by emotional strife, primarily within his mother’s extended family. “(My parents) were living together but they were emotionally divorced, so we were on our own, working and growing up,” Ali remembers. “My mother’s family were all into drugs, crime, fights, prison or other sorts of trouble.”

This toxic legacy also impacted Ali, who began using drugs as a teenager. “Drugs and alcohol were really common in my family, from my mother’s side,” Ali says. “If you weren’t using, you would be ridiculed and laughed at.” Soon Ali was addicted to heroin, an affliction that would continue even after he married Zahra—and after they had their sons.

Ali’s addiction was devastating to his family. “My husband was mostly not at home and was at places that he could take drugs,” Zahra remembers. “I was alone in raising my kids. Because of his drug problem and the expense of drugs, we lived in poverty and could not have what we wanted or … have a comfortable life.”

As the years went by, Zahra grew deeply depressed. “I could not keep myself together and couldn’t control my tears (even just walking in the streets),” she says. She didn’t even want to be around her children because she didn’t want them to see her so sad.

As a deeply religious Muslim, she turned to God to try to find answers. “I also cried while saying prayers to God, and I used to spend hours complaining to Him and ask Him, ‘Why did this happen to me?’”

But then, Jesus changed everything.

When you first meet Ali and Zahra and their two sons, Daniel and Samuel, you probably wouldn’t notice anything remarkable about them.

Ali and Zahra have an obvious and playful bond, clearly a couple who’s been married for decades and gone through the years with love. Daniel, a 20-something in fashionable aviator sunglasses, is excited about his new apartment—the first time he’s lived away from his parents. Samuel is a teenager and spends a lot of his time trying to occupy the family computer so he can play PC games his parents don’t begin to understand.

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Heading toward rock bottom

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All because they follow Jesus.
A burning flame—and a sense of peace

Ali had reached rock bottom. “One night I was using drugs and thinking about killing myself,” he shares, staring at the ground. “I wanted to end my life—and I was thinking that my death would be a relief for my wife and children.”

But that night something happened to Ali. “In my dreams, I saw a man from Heaven holding out his hands to me, and he was saying, ‘Give me your hands, if you dare!’ And when I took his hand, a flame burned me from head to toe,” Ali recalls. “When I woke up, I felt strange. I was crying, and Zahra woke up.” Ali told Zahra about his dream, and the couple went all over the city to the sacred places of Shiite Islam trying to find out who the man in the dream had been.

Ali was so desperate to find the person from his dream that he even began to look outside Islam. The couple’s search led them to a group of Christians who knew Ali was an addict, since one of the group had been an addict as well. Ali knew his friend’s life had changed but didn’t believe in prayer.

“Do you want us to pray for you to get free of your addiction? ’” Ali told his friend to go ahead, though Ali knew Ali was an addict, since one of the group had been an addict as well. Ali knew his friend’s life had changed but didn’t believe in prayer.

His friend started praying the Lord’s Prayer, and as he did, something remarkable happened to Ali. “The same Lord’s Prayer, and as he did, something happened to Ali. ‘Do you want us to pray for you to get free of your addiction?’” Ali says. “It was a huge step because there was no support anymore; everyone was opposed to me, so I knew what path I chose.”

“I am [seen as] defiled, and my life is considered filthy by them.”

Ali and Zahra knew this was the reality they were entering once they made their faith decision. “When I became a Christian, I said to myself, ‘My family, my country and everything are behind me,’” Ali says. “It was a huge step because the regime [of] Iran is against converting Muslims. Therefore, [the family] rejects the person. If someone like me becomes a Christian, I am [seen as] defiled, and my life is considered filthy by them.”

Zahra, Ali, and their sons were overjoyed. Their family had been miraculously healed, and God’s goodness was so apparent. But they are from Iran—and decisions to follow Jesus are never easy in Iran.

A costly choice

“In Iran, when someone becomes a Christian, their family becomes defensive,” Ali explains. “It is either because of fundamentalist ideas or out of fear because of the regime’s attitude toward converted Christians. Therefore, [the family] rejects the person. If someone like me becomes a Christian, I am [seen as] defiled, and my life is considered filthy by them.”

And that’s why they were arrested.

“You’d better die”

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps are the branch of the Iranian military that makes sure Islamic law is followed. And it was a group of these guards that showed up at a meeting of the church network that Ali and Zahra belonged to. They arrested and interrogated everyone at the meeting. The authorities discovered that Ali and Zahra—who were not at the meeting at the time of the arrest—were also part of the church network and started looking for them too.

Zahra was at a church meeting without Ali when they found her. “We saw them coming toward the home,” she remembers. “We were trying to hide the information we had, and we did not open the door. Then, we saw them coming in from the window. We were on the second floor, and they rushed the home and arrested us. First, they blindfolded us, and then they put us in a car and drove us somewhere we couldn’t see. They put us in different rooms and started interrogating us. They decided to arrest Ali, too. They called him with my phone and said, ‘Your wife had an accident; come to the hospital.’ They took me with them for the arrest, and they arrested him in front of the hospital.”

Ali remembers the day he got that call. He phoned a friend who worked at the hospital, who told him Zahra wasn’t there. Ali soon realized what was happening and went to the hospital to face the authorities. “On the way, I started deleting phone numbers from out with you anymore, people will think bad things about us.”

Eventually, as the family’s faith became more public, more consequences followed. Ali lost his job, and the family lost social privileges. But as everyone and everything fell away, their love for Jesus only grew. They joined the ministry team of a network of underground house churches, excited about joining other believers in worship and prayer.

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Ali and Zahra knew this was the reality they were entering once they made their faith decision. “When I became a Christian, I said to myself, ‘My family, my country and everything are behind me,’” Ali says. “It was a huge step because there was no support anymore; everyone was opposed to me, so I knew what path I chose.”

“You’d better die”

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps are the branch of the Iranian military that makes sure Islamic law is followed. And it was a group of these guards that showed up at a meeting of the church network that Ali and Zahra belonged to. They arrested and interrogated everyone at the meeting. The authorities discovered that Ali and Zahra—who were not at the meeting at the time of the arrest—were also part of the church network and started looking for them too.

Zahra was at a church meeting without Ali when they found her. “We saw them coming toward the home,” she remembers. “We were trying to hide the information we had, and we did not open the door. Then, we saw them coming in from the window. We were on the second floor, and they rushed the home and arrested us. First, they blindfolded us, and then they put us in a car and drove us somewhere we couldn’t see. They put us in different rooms and started interrogating us. They decided to arrest Ali, too. They called him with my phone and said, ‘Your wife had an accident; come to the hospital.’ They took me with them for the arrest, and they arrested him in front of the hospital.”

Ali remembers the day he got that call. He phoned a friend who worked at the hospital, who told him Zahra wasn’t there. Ali soon realized what was happening and went to the hospital to face the authorities. “On the way, I started deleting phone numbers from out with you anymore, people will think bad things about us.”

Eventually, as the family’s faith became more public, more consequences followed. Ali lost his job, and the family lost social privileges. But as everyone and everything fell away, their love for Jesus only grew. They joined the ministry team of a network of underground house churches, excited about joining other believers in worship and prayer.

And that’s why they were arrested.

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my phone to keep other believers’ identities safe,” Ali says. “I didn’t want others to get caught. When I got there, agents handcuffed and blindfolded me, put a bag over my head and threw me in the car. It was then that I realized Zahra was in the car too. They started driving, and we couldn’t see where we were going. They took Zahra away and I didn’t know where they took her. Then they took me to a jail cell with no lights, toilet or blanket.”

Once imprisoned, the couple lived in separate cells and endured days of interrogation. “They held me for one week in solitary confinement, in a tiny room with no lights or windows,” Zahra recalls. “There wasn’t any electricity. There was no pillow or blanket or bed. Late at night, they would take me upstairs for interrogation. I did not answer a single question. He [would say], ‘You are filthy; you are pulling others in your filth. This is not your country—if it was, you would not do this … and you’d better die.’”

Ali endured similar treatment. “They asked questions about other believers and if I was a Christian or not. I answered, ‘I am,’” he says. “The worst part was that at two or three in the morning they would take us for interrogation for three to five hours. Whatever the questions and answers were, they would start all over again. ‘Their goal was to identify underground churches, and they knew that we were active in ministry and knew a lot of people. They wanted to infiltrate the churches. They even said, ‘Cooperate with us, and you can have a church without any interference.’ It was interesting that when I complained to them, ‘What you are doing is illegal,’ they said, ‘I am the constitution, whatever I say is the law. Even the president is not above me.’”

For Ali, the abuse wasn’t only verbal and psychological. “During the interrogation I was beaten a lot,” he says. “[My interrogator] asked, ‘Who is your pastor? And if you say Jesus Christ, I will make you suffer badly.’ I said, ‘I have none.’ He punched me on the shoulder, but since I was blindfolded, I couldn’t tell where the punch [would land].” Then they picked me up and sat me on a chair and tied both hands to the chair. He asked, ‘Do you know where you are sitting?’ I answered, ‘I am blindfolded, I don’t know.’ He said, ‘You are on an electric chair.’ Eventually, Ali and Zahra were released. But the situation wouldn’t grow any easier.

No place to go

Being out of prison didn’t make their lives better—far from it. And that seemed to be the plan of Iranian authorities. “When I came out of prison, I told myself that I will start building again,” Ali says. “But I got fired from every job I had after a week; [the authorities] would just send a letter and ask my employer to let me go. My sons weren’t allowed to go to school; each day [I went out], there was a chance of me not coming back. [The authorities] would ask me to go for interrogation on different hours of the day, and each time I had to call Zahra and tell her that I might go and not come back. Each day was suffering and torture.”
The couple endured two years in Iran after their arrest, under constant harassment. They knew at any moment they could be summoned back to prison, with no idea when they might be released. “[The authorities] themselves said that it is better for you to leave the country—you have no place here,” Zahra echoes. “My husband said that we have no place here, we have to go.”

And so, the family made the impossibly difficult decision to leave Iran. “It is really painful to leave your country like this,” Ali says. “If there was a way, we would have been in Iran now. We would serve the Lord and live our lives. For me and my family, our immigration was an unbearable burden because it was not out of choice. We were thrown out. We were deprived of everything. Even the company [where] I worked for many years did not pay my pension because [they] ordered [not] to do so. We had two choices: to stay and suffer, especially our children, or to [leave] and reach a relative peace.”

The memory of that time continues to linger for the couple. Zahra still can’t talk about the moment they crossed the border into Turkey without crying. “I cannot forget that on the border I looked at the flag and said, ‘It’s [my] last look at [the Iranian] flag.’ It is really difficult,” she says through tears.

God is still good

As they look back, Ali and Zahra still see God’s hand at work in their lives, even in the darkest moments.

“When you are inside the jail, you know you are no longer in control,” Zahra says. “No one can help you; they can do to you whatever they want. While in prison, I thought to myself, ‘There are people who love me and cry for my pain and suffering—and, most importantly, pray for me.’ Because without God’s power, you cannot tolerate [prison] and keep going.”

“(It) doesn’t matter where we are from;” Ali adds. “The only thing that matters is that we are part of the same Body.

When we were in solitary [confinement], the only thing that strengthened us was prayer; nothing else would work. Only God can go to those dark places and dungeons and be strength for His children.

“I WANT to SAY THIS TO CHRISTIANS in IRAN: EVEN IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS, WHEN NO ONE IS BESIDE YOU, YOU HAVE to KNOW THAT GOD is; HE WILL NEVER FORSAKE YOU!”

Though they have found a more peaceful way of living, their new country doesn’t mean life is easy or even comfortable. As refugees in Turkey, they are forbidden from working or going to school. They still mourn the loss of their family and friends back in Iran. That day they crossed the border, Ali, Zahra, Daniel and Samuel really did lose everything for Jesus.

Would they still choose to follow Jesus, knowing everything they’d give up? “The person interrogating me asked me the exact same question,” Zahra says. “He said, ‘Imagine I am not your interrogator, and you are not a convict. If you go back knowing all this [about prison], would you pick Jesus again?’ I said, ‘Yes!’

Even after all they’ve been through, all they’ve given up, the hope of Jesus shines through the family. “Through all these sufferings, Christ never left me alone,” Ali says. “Lots of people forsook me, but through hardships, He didn’t leave me alone. When Jesus told Lazarus, ‘Rise from the dead,’ Lazarus didn’t say, ‘No, I don’t want to.’ Jesus did the same for me and raised me from the dead. I cannot live without Him; there is no other way around it.”

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Once they left Iran, Ali, Zahra, Daniel and Samuel had a chance to attend a seminar that teaches believers how to persevere in persecution, supported by Open Doors partners. The lessons they learned there have helped them begin to sort through what happened to them in Iran—and begin to heal.

The participants at these seminars learn how to stand strong for Jesus, no matter what, and how to recover from the trauma of imprisonment and interrogation. Church leaders also learn practical tactics to avoid capture and keep Iranian secret police from learning the identities of entire church communities.

These seminars strengthen the secret church in the region and help believers remain firm in faith—and recover when they’ve been through severe trauma. Your gifts and prayers make these kinds of seminars possible, strengthening the Church and helping deeply wounded Christians to persevere.
**FOR SECRET BELIEVER**

**Ruslan, FOLLOWING JESUS TAKES PRAYER FOLLOWING BELIEVER FOR SECRET of a global congregations.**

Ruslan is a pastor, and these are his inside in underground house churches.

Once inside, he gets to work. He begins the neighborhood sees. Doors that will open quietly to let him in, He knows which doors to knock on—the until late at night.

And usually doesn't get to his destinations Asia, drives a simple, inconspicuous car Ruslan,* a church leader from Central Christians

Ruslan describes persecution as a growing wave. It starts small, then builds. The Central Asian pastor experienced this personally. His sister was the first in their family to become a Christian. Their mother, who was firmly against her daughter’s conversion, began actively opposing her new faith.

She wrote to the local newspaper about the church Ruslan’s sister attended, accusing it of being a sect that took her children away from her. She continued to try to stop the church from meeting until she eventually felt the pull of the Spirit and accepted Jesus herself. Ruslan followed soon after. Unfortunately, when this happened, all of Ruslan’s closest relatives severed their relationship with him and his immediate family.

The persecution didn’t end there. There was persecution against Ruslan’s children, too. He sent his daughter to a local school, and she began to share the gospel with her classmates. Her classmates, all Muslim, said, “Stop doing this because we are not interested and do not want to listen.” However, her daughter kept sharing until she was dragged into the street, beaten and thrown into the winter snow.

Afterward they warned her:

“STOP, WE WILL BURN YOUR FACE with ACID.”

Ruslan was forced to transfer her to another school.

Then there were the attacks on his home. Ruslan’s house was routinely vandalized, and its windows were repeatedly broken. He also received two warnings from the authorities to stop his ministry.

But still, he continued.

AN EMOTIONALLY TARGETED PERSECUTION

One of the most emotionally draining forms of persecution in this part of Central Asia happens after a believer dies. When a Christian dies in one of these rural areas, the local community will not allow the believer to be buried in the local cemetery, even if the person is from that village. The villagers say the Christian body will desecrate the Muslim cemetery.

Ruslan has seen this firsthand after the death of a believer in a rural village. “When we started the burial process, I saw many people coming toward us,” he remembers. “Fearing the worst, we stood shoulder to shoulder with shovels and got ready because we thought they would stone us. But instead, they told us that we could not bury this man there as he was not from their village and must take him back. Fortunately, a local government person came and managed to appease the crowd to avoid further tension.”

 Even though it wasn’t true that the man was from a different town, Ruslan and the others decided to stop digging and leave everything until the following day. However, upon their return, they saw that villagers had used the freshly dug grave to bury a Muslim.

“The head of the local government said I was warned and that if I valued my life, then I should not bury this man here,” Ruslan says. “Thus, we were forced to bury him in a third village, just because he was a Christian.”

This kind of constant struggle is draining on believers—and its intent is to make the faith of Christians very risky. But God has not forgotten them.

HOW YOU’RE HELPING SPREAD THE GOSPEL IN CENTRAL ASIA

Through local partners, Open Doors started to help Ruslan 13 years ago. He was invited to a pastors’ conference in Central Asia and then realized it was a secret meeting. Open Doors partners spoke about how we help believers in Central Asian countries.

Ruslan was invited to share his experience, the many difficulties he had gone through and the persistent persecutions. It was the beginning of a strong relationship that has lasted.

“Open Doors helped me personally when I needed help,” he says. “They helped me undergo diabetes treatment because, at that time, I could not afford it. I was taking insulin, but after this expensive course of treatment, I stopped taking insulin and
then, with God’s help, I stopped taking pills and was completely healed. They helped me, as they took the first step to find me.”

Muslim religious leaders in one village discovered that some in their community had converted to Christianity. According to Ruslan, they gave three orders to make life impossible for them: Christian children were no longer allowed to attend school; cattle belonging to Christians were not allowed to eat the same grass as the livestock of Muslims; and Christian farmers were not given water to irrigate their crops. No school for their children, no grass for their cattle, and no water for their crops: No chance for survival.

Ruslan turned to Open Doors for help. Thanks to your gifts and prayers, Open Doors partners on the ground were able to deliver aid to these desperate believers. “You helped these believers survive these difficult times,” Ruslan says. “Some received hay, others received water, and others received sewing machines or other tools that could help them earn a living. [Our church is a poor church.] What we cannot help with, you can.”

Open Doors also provided counseling to local Christians who went through severe persecution. When we contacted Open Doors and shared about [the] situations and that we needed support in solving such issues, everything was provided,” Ruslan says. “What you do is essential. You are not ordinary people but an answer from the Lord. We know that we are not alone but part of a large Christian family. [What does a family do?] At the most trying moments they will come to support you.”

“Thanks to your prayers and support, we are able to survive in this hostile environment,” he says.
There’s perhaps no greater reflection of the upside-down reality of the Kingdom of God than in these “blessings and woes” from Jesus. It’s a Kingdom where the poor, the hungry, the sad and the persecuted are blessed—and where the rich and the popular are told they will mourn and weep. This seems so … backwards. This Kingdom is already here among us, at work. True, the world is a broken place, and the Kingdom isn’t yet here completely. But we can glimpse this upside-down reality if we have the courage to look for it!

This is the reality that believers like Dhea* show us. Dhea is a believer in Asia. (We can’t even tell you what part of Asia because it’s so dangerous for believers there, particularly for Christians who leave Islam, like Dhea.) She came to know Jesus in a prison, where she’d been sent because she’d been raped and left pregnant. Being pregnant without being married is a crime in her country, so she was sentenced and imprisoned.

When she got out, she had a new faith and a new relationship with a God who loves her. But she knew this was risky in her country. “It’s [worse] than being a traitor,” she says. “A murderer is better than that. It is the worst thing that a person can do. The person does not deserve to live.”

She was disowned by her family, and religious leaders questioned her. Her community thought she had lost her mind. And yet she continued to stand firm in her new faith.

And so, she was sent to prison again.

When she was released again, she fled. She knew she would be killed if she stayed in her home country.

Dhea is exactly who Jesus talks about in Luke 6—someone who is hated, excluded, insulted and rejected. But Jesus calls people like Dhea blessed. And Dhea’s life now is a testament to this.

She was able to go to school and learn how to help people with medical issues. And now she opens her home to anyone from her home country, a place with minimal medical infrastructure. She bandages wounds, feeds people and cares for whatever medical issues they may have. And she tells them about Jesus.

Through Dhea’s faithfulness, the gospel is spreading in her home country. People are hearing the good news of the gospel from Dhea and returning home to live for Jesus. The upside-down Kingdom is more and more visible. Praise God!

LUKE 6:20–26

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

REFLECT

There’s perhaps no greater reflection of the upside-down reality of the Kingdom of God than in these “blessings and woes” from Jesus. It’s a Kingdom where the poor, the hungry, the sad and the persecuted are blessed—and where the rich and the popular are told they will mourn and weep. This seems so … backwards. This Kingdom is already here among us, at work. True, the world is a broken place, and the Kingdom isn’t yet here completely. But we can glimpse this upside-down reality if we have the courage to look for it!

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*Name changed to preserve security

PRAY

Father God, I thank you for the example of Dhea. Thank you for allowing me—and all of us—to see the reality of your Kingdom even in the midst of the world’s brokenness. I ask that you would bless Dhea’s ministry and keep her safe. Help the people she serves to raise up new believers in her country, and bring an outpouring of your Spirit there. I ask that you would give me eyes to see your Kingdom in my daily life, and to live in that reality as I love and serve others in the power of the Spirit. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

*Name changed to preserve security
Tell us about your church.

Clinton Frame Church is comprised of about 350 regular attendees, worshiping God together. Our mission is, “Making and Launching Disciples of Christ to transform our world.”

When and why did your congregation begin to be drawn to persecuted believers?

Our outreach ministry is constantly looking for new avenues of outreach where we can get involved. Last year we decided to investigate the need and what is being done and came upon (1) the extreme pressure that so many Christians are facing in our world against their faiths and (2) the amazing work that Open Doors is doing to bring awareness and resources to help the situation.

What’s a place your congregation has a real heart for?

Going through the World Watch List and using the prayer app, we are aghast and stunned. We hear the cry.

Clinton Frame Church
Goshen, Indiana

Tell us about your church.

Trinity Baptist Church in Indio, California, was started in 1948 in a living room where a few local Christians were meeting for Bible study. Nearly 75 years later, God is still using Trinity for His purposes.

When and why did your congregation begin to be drawn to persecuted believers?

Pastor David Gordon found his heart for persecuted Christians and for providing Bibles for them after a trip to Central Asia in the 1990s. He shared his stories and the realities of what life is like for persecuted Christians, and we enthusiastically jumped in to raise money for Bibles for persecuted Christians.

What’s a place your congregation has a real heart for?

One of the places we have a heart for is Iran. Believers there face great difficulties when their faith is not secret.

Trinity Baptist Church
Indio, California

How does your church serve persecuted Christians through Open Doors?

The main way at this point is to bring the need to the people of our congregation to get them involved in prayer.

What’s one piece of encouragement you’d offer to other churches about caring for persecuted Christians?

To a great extent, the churches of North America have been living in the mentality of “out of sight, out of mind.” We need to wake up and realize what these millions of our dear brothers and sisters are going through and get involved. Our responding, caring and engaging God can use us to bless our persecuted partners and revive us as well.

Pastor David Gordon
Clinton Frame Church

There are believers around the world who are persecuted for their beliefs, but you can help your family in Christ today by making a gift of part or all of your IRA’s required minimum distribution to Open Doors USA. This type of IRA gift is called a Qualified Charitable Distribution. Such a gift can help your persecuted brothers and sisters, and make it possible for you to:

- Give a gift from your IRA that won’t be subject to income tax
- Use your IRA to benefit causes you care deeply about
- Help build a charitable legacy

To learn more or give, visit our website at legacy.opendoorsusa.org, email us at plannedgiving@odusa.org or call us at (888) 524-2535 and ask for the Planned Giving Department.

You must be 70 ½ years of age or older to qualify. Other restrictions may apply. Please obtain advice from your professional tax advisor.

Use your IRA to help persecuted Christians today
Pray for Persecuted Christians from anywhere with the Open Doors Prayer App

Text PRAYER to 32500

Message and data rates may apply