



HOPE IN ISOLATION

Lessons from the Persecuted Church in Isolation

OpenDoors[®]

STRENGTHENING CHRISTIANS WHERE FAITH COSTS THE MOST

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PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS HAVE LONG KNOWN THE BURDEN OF LIVING IN ISOLATION. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THEM?

The experiences of the Church in persecution inform us in our times of isolation and suffering.

The world as we know it has changed – seemingly overnight. A global pandemic has left us navigating through territory that would have been unimaginable just a short time ago.

Will we send our kids to school? Will we risk physically going to the store or will we shop exclusively online? Will family celebrations ever be the same? Will church return to what it was before? With so many questions and new protocols, many of us find ourselves unsettled and even isolated.

We are learning first-hand that the effects of isolation are real. But this has been the testimony of multitudes of believers who have endured isolation and suffering for years. Could it be that now is their moment to teach us how to persevere in unsettling times?



1 MENTAL ISOLATION

FEELING ALONE IN THE MIDDLE OF A CROWD

Think of markets buzzing with life in busy Arab cities. Vendors haggle behind mountains of wonderfully fragrant fruit, vegetables and spices. Baklava and other pastries make your mouth water. The people who live here hardly seem isolated.

The muezzin's call to prayer seems to bring a momentary respite from all the commotion before the animation starts up again. However, not everyone feels equally calmed by the muezzin's call.

Fatima's* parents, brothers and sisters, even her husband and children, are unaware that she became a Christian a few years ago.

She discovered Christianity through a television program. Now she regularly reads the Bible through a secret app on her phone.

If Fatima's father or any of her brothers find out that she has left Islam, they will not hesitate to kill her. She shudders to think what would happen if her husband discovers her conversion.

Fatima is a believer forced to live her faith in complete and total secrecy. The veil she is compelled to wear has become a powerful reminder of the spiritual prison that she escaped when leaving Islam.

Her relatives are numerous and kind, her children are lively and joyful. She has many friends with whom she likes to stroll with through the market. Yet on the inside, Fatima feels completely alone. She would love to be able to talk with other Christians, but she doesn't know any. And even if she did, she would avoid all contact, because if her faith was discovered, she would be immediately rejected by society and separated from her children. So, she continues to play the good Muslim, even though it wears

her out emotionally. Fatima has felt isolated for years and does not see an end to her mental seclusion.



Image used for illustrative purposes

Alone – But Not Abandoned

Fatima is like many Christians in countries where leaving one's original religion – whether Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or a tribal religion – to turn to Christianity is a great danger. That is why many Christians keep their faith a secret. When we hear their testimonies we feel the toll isolation is taking on their lives. Yet, we also see incredible resilience when they speak of how they draw strength from their faith in Jesus Christ. They know His presence and feel carried by Him.

Believers in restricted countries live knowing that they may never meet another Christian, and also with the weight of not being able to share their faith – not even with their own children.

They don't have beautiful churches to meet in, modern hymns to sing, age-appropriate children's programs or access to Christian literature. People like Fatima can only read the Bible through a secret app on their cell phone, because a printed Bible would put them in too much danger. But they have Jesus Christ in their hearts. They live in isolation, but they know they are never alone. They are carried by Him who lifts us beyond our present life and circumstances.

**Representative character used for illustrative purposes*

QUESTIONS

1. How would you feel if you were shunned for your faith?
2. Have you ever felt isolated inside because of your faith?
3. How do you feel when you hear of Christians elsewhere in the world who live in mental isolation because of their faith?

PLEASE PRAY

- For strength for those who are forced to live their faith in secret.
- That God will replenish their hearts and souls.
- That they will be able to grow in faith, despite the limited discipleship resources at their disposal.
- That their situation will change and that they will find other Christians.
- That other family members of these Christians will also find faith (which happens regularly).

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

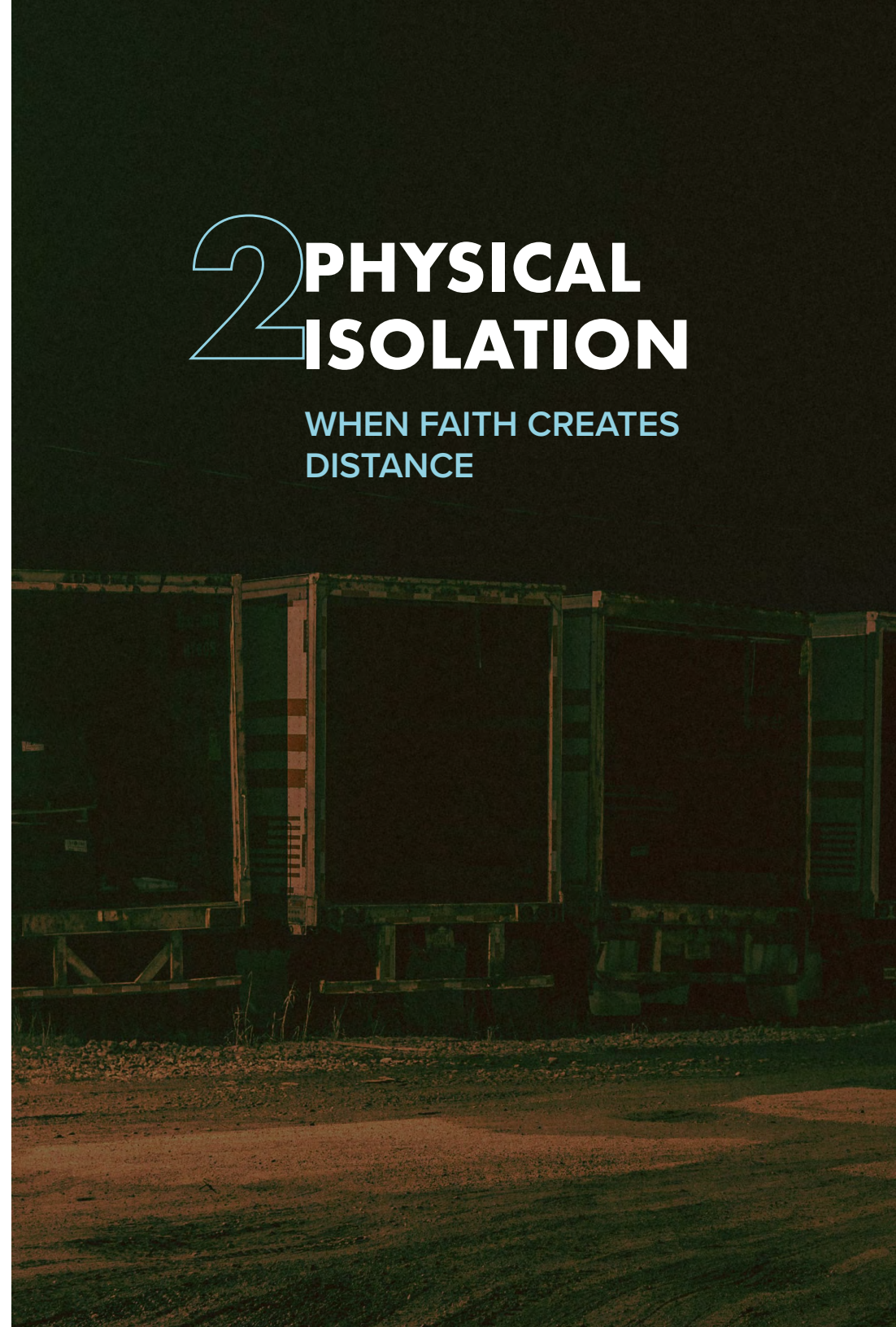
PSALM 23:4

“But now, this is what the Lord says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.”

ISAIAH 43:1-2

2 PHYSICAL ISOLATION

WHEN FAITH CREATES DISTANCE



Physical isolation is a very real threat for believers who live in places hostile to the Gospel. Many Christians are excluded from society because of their faith and find themselves living segregated and alone. For example, in Mustafa's* Middle Eastern culture, family is everything. His family ate from the same plate; their bond was incredibly strong. Until Mustafa discovered the Christian faith. When his secret came out, he had to run away.

"The pain is immense when you grew up in this tight-knit community and now those same people are trying to kill you."

For his safety, Mustafa hasn't lived in his home country for a long time. In the West, where families sometimes live far apart with little daily contact, it is difficult to imagine the full extent of family rejection in Mustafa's culture. It can mean losing your entire social network. Mustafa's story is similar to that of many other people who converted to Christianity from another religion.

Others even find themselves in prison because of their faith. This was the case of Helen Berhane from Eritrea.



Helen Berhane says she grew closer to God during her persecution in Eritrea, where she was locked in a container.

The Christian singer was locked up in a shipping container for years. She remembers, "The soldiers beat me. My body was black with bruises. But I forgave my persecutors. I prayed for God to touch them. Today, I see my time in prison as a time at the university. I believe God sent me there to train me."

Helen points out that the Christian life is full of struggles and challenges every day. "If we refuse to face them, we distance ourselves from God. It is important to see beyond these struggles to the victory promised to us by Jesus Christ."

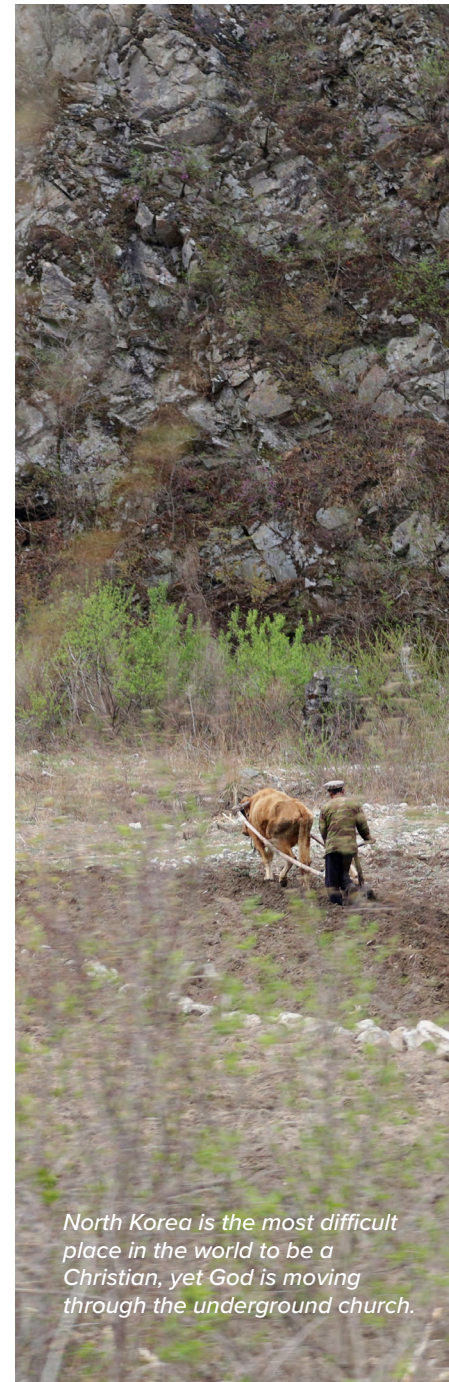
** Name changed for security reasons*

QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever been rejected by family members, schoolmates or co-workers because of your faith?
2. How does it feel to know that there are other Christians behind bars right now because of their faith?
3. How have times of isolation changed your view of people persecuted for their faith?

PLEASE PRAY

- For strength for those who have been rejected by their families or sent to prison for their faith.
- That those in isolation and under pressure will grow in their faith, like Helen Berhane.
- For justice to reign.
- That other prisoners will find Jesus.



North Korea is the most difficult place in the world to be a Christian, yet God is moving through the underground church.

“When my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who watch over my way. In the path where I walk people have hidden a snare for me.”

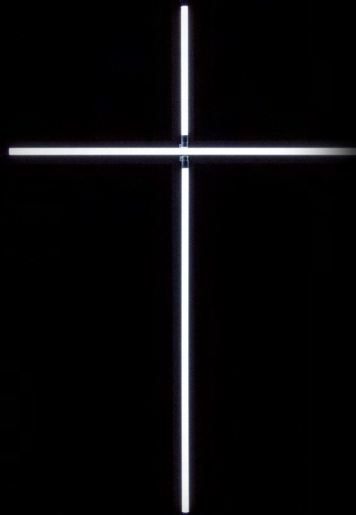
PSALM 142: 3

“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?”

HEBREWS 13:5-6

3 ISOLATION IN THE BIBLE

THE ENSTRANGEMENT OF BELIEVERS IS NOTHING NEW



“Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” Psalm 25:16

In this Psalm, David encourages us to seek God in hard times regardless of why we find ourselves in them. There are those who seek his demise and have gained the advantage over him. He feels lonely and afflicted and he feels things are just getting worse. All he can do is seek the Lord.

The estrangement and harassment of Christians dates back to biblical times. In Acts 8:1-4 we read, “And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the Word wherever they went.”

At the time, the authorities were trying with all its might to destroy Christianity. Many Christians were scattered – running for their lives. Many were killed or ended up in prison, isolated from the community of faith.

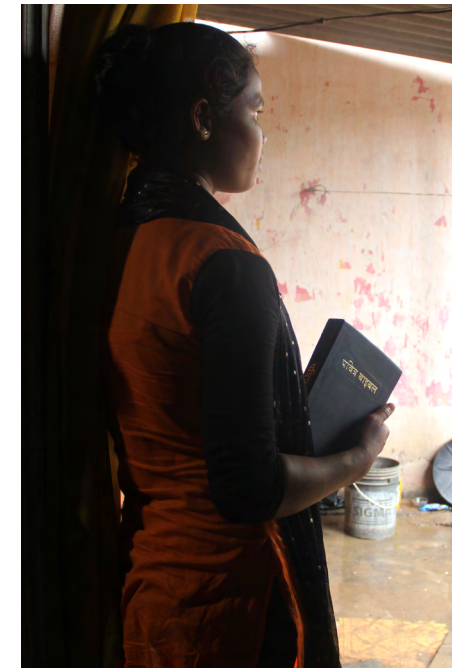
In Acts 8 we are struck by Saul’s indifference to the severe persecution of Christians. Stephen was killed, and while other men were burying him and deeply mourning his loss, Saul continued violence without skipping a beat.

Later, Saul found Jesus, became Paul, and became a victim of persecution and imprisonment himself. On several occasions he had to justify himself before the authorities and murder plans were formed against him.

Jesus Himself spoke of persecution: “I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.” (Matthew 23:34)

Even Jesus experienced moments of isolation – when He was tempted by Satan in the desert or when His disciples fell asleep instead of praying with Him. Also when He cried out to God on the cross, “Why have you forsaken me?”

Many of Jesus’ early disciples were executed, including most of the apostles. Nevertheless, the surviving Christians continued to share their faith without



Teenager Tara endures isolation in her own home, unable to share her faith with her family.

wavering. They were bold because their faith offered them something they did not have before: a hope beyond this earthly life. Even with the constant threat that their faith might lead to isolation or imprisonment, they had an assurance that we too can have – that Jesus helps us to stand firm, even in times of isolation and worry.

QUESTIONS

1. How does the book of Acts speak to you in times of worry and separation?
2. Do you read the Bible differently in times of isolation?
3. What has been particularly striking to you in your times of isolation?

PLEASE PRAY

- For frontline workers. May God give them strength and health as they faithfully serve others.
- That Christians will experience God's grace in times of loneliness and worry.
- That the testimony and courage of the early Christians and our persecuted brothers and sisters would inspire and strengthen us.

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.”

JOHN 15:18

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”

ROMANS 8:35



4 BIBLE PASSAGES

ISOLATION WILL NOT HAVE THE LAST WORD

The Bible speaks clearly to situations of distress and isolation. We have the promise that God will carry us through difficult times. He is always with us. As He promised Joshua: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Joshua 1:5)

Times of loneliness and worry threaten to weaken or disable us, but isolation will not have the last word: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)



Dukashini’s mother used to read the Bible to her illiterate father every night. Since her mother died in the Easter bombing in Sri Lanka in 2019, Dukashini has taken over her role.

OTHER ENCOURAGING PROMISES FROM THE BIBLE:

“The Lord Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”

DEUTERONOMY 31:8

“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

ISAIAH 40:31

“For the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

JOSHUA 1:9



Agus, a Christian leader from a Muslim background, shares the Gospel.
**Name changed for security reasons*

“Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.”

PSALM 31:24

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

JOHN 16:33

QUESTIONS

1. Which verses are presently bringing you comfort?
2. How is the Bible speaking to you in new ways?
3. Is there someone who needs your encouragement today?

PLEASE PRAY

- For believers to find strength in God’s eternal Word.
- That others around us will discover the strength that comes from God alone.



5 ISOLATED WITH THEM

UNITED IN PRAYER

“Pray for us” is always the first response when persecuted Christians are asked how we can support them. Through prayer they feel that God is carrying them, and they know that they have not been forgotten. Those who have been imprisoned for their faith are especially aware of the power of prayer.

We can support persecuted Christians in prayer in many ways. We can pray for their daily needs, as many Christians lose their jobs and their living when others discover their faith. We can pray that our persecuted brothers and sisters would stay strong through the storm, whether they’re facing harassment, discrimination, social exclusion, violence, imprisonment or isolation. We can pray for Christian children, who may face bullying or discrimination at school – or hostility from their families.

QUESTIONS

1. How do times of personal loneliness help you better identify with persecuted Christians? Do you feel a deeper connection to the global church?
2. Has learning about your persecuted church family helped to boost your prayer life?

PLEASE PRAY

- That believers persecuted for their faith will feel supported.
- That God will carry them, protect them and give them strength and courage each day.
- That the global family of God will experience greater unity.

“For the Lord your God is a merciful God; He will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which He confirmed to them by oath.”

DEUTERONOMY 4:31

“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”

1 CORINTHIANS 15:58



6 HOW WE CAN HELP THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Brother Andrew, the founder of Open Doors, said 'YES' to God and gave his life to serve the persecuted Church more than 65 years ago.

Brother Andrew had a moment of sudden realization as he read Revelation 3:2, "Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die." He knew God was speaking to him about his life's work. He was not a hero: he was even refused entry to a Bible school because the principal felt that he was not fit to attend. (Years later, he was offered a teaching position at the same school).

Brother Andrew would not yield to discouragement. Rather, he set out in his VW Beetle to deliver God's Word to Christians behind the Iron Curtain. He saw Christians desperately in need of Bibles so he smuggled them across the border, becoming "God's Smuggler".

Brother Andrew experienced the power of prayer on a daily basis. He said, "If we were aware of the full potential of our prayers, we'd get down on our knees a hundred times a day and ask Him for things that would change the world."

Today there are many ways to help persecuted Christians:

- Prayer is what persecuted believers most often ask for.
- Your generous gifts make it possible to distribute Bibles, offer trauma counselling, train leaders, give emergency aid to needy families, including the families of arrested pastors, and much more.
- Sending cards or signing petitions to give courage and a voice to persecuted Christians. You can find examples on our website.

- Travelling. We regularly offer opportunities to visit persecuted Christians in various countries.
- Volunteering your skills and time.
- Sharing content on social networks.

QUESTIONS

1. How does prayer change your relationship with the persecuted Church?
2. Will you consider praying regularly for those who are isolated because of their faith? You can find inspiration and the latest prayer points on our website.
www.opendoorsca.org



Young people pray to God for hope and strength during a youth event in Ethiopia.

PLEASE PRAY

- That the message of the persecuted Church will reach more individuals.
- For God to show us what He is calling us personally to do.



Cards, letters and children's drawings were delivered to encourage members of a house church in Central Asia. The cards were part of a letter-writing campaign and were sent from Open Doors supporters.

“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

HEBREWS 13:3

“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.”

EPHESIANS 6:18-20

7 APPENDIX

SEVEN LESSONS FROM PRISON



As a final encouragement, here are seven things we can learn from Chinese pastors who have spent many years in prison.

These lessons are drawn from multiple interviews with a total of nine pastors:

1. ACCEPTING THAT SUFFERING IS NORMAL WHEN WE FOLLOW JESUS

“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” 1 Peter 4:12

The nine pastors are all convinced that following Christ and suffering go hand in hand. One of them said: “We felt it was normal: we were not shocked. If you want to follow God, you have to accept those kinds of consequences.”

We may not be held in prison for our faith, but experiencing times of profound and prolonged isolation teaches us that none of us are exempt from suffering.

2. LETTING GO AND SURRENDERING TO GOD’S WILL

“If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me!” Mark 8:34

When the Chinese pastors decided to persevere in faith, they risked losing everything that was dear to them. They described what it was like to let go and rely on God.

In our case, we must understand that God is sovereign. God’s will is one of the most difficult things to

understand. Jesus never asked His disciples to approve of it. On the contrary, He asked them to leave their lives behind and follow Him no matter what the cost.



It is risky for believers from a Buddhist background to worship God together in China.

3. WORSHIP AND RECITATION OF SCRIPTURE IS A SPIRITUAL FORCE FOR THE CHURCH.

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” Acts 16:25

The pastors also worshipped God during their time in prison and recited the Holy Scriptures for spiritual strength. Some even sang hymns, one of which can be translated as follows: “When we pray, the grace of heaven comes. When we pray, the gates of heaven open. When we pray, strength comes. When we pray, victory comes.”

Worshipping, singing, praying, reading or reciting the Bible also helps us in our times of isolation to direct our minds and hearts to Jesus. The flood of information from outside sources can easily overwhelm us. In our times of trouble we need to hold on to what is eternal and true, to God and to what His Word says.

4. SEEK TRUE COMMUNITY

“Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” Ecclesiastes 4:12

For the pastors, the support of other believers was essential to survive their imprisonment. Christians have found ways to support each other and pray together in prison and labour camps despite all the risks. Knowing that others care about us – even if we don’t see them – makes a significant difference. Isolation makes us vulnerable. The first thing the enemy does when he wants to destroy a Christian’s morale is to isolate the person. Conversely, it is our unity that gives glory to Jesus. So, worship Him in your own home but join with other Christians whether in person or through other creative avenues.

5. FEEL THE PRESENCE OF GOD

“The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.” Psalm 34:19-20

Several of the pastors interviewed reported how they experienced God’s presence in times of doubt and despair. They all felt God’s presence in a very real way during their suffering.

God does special things in special circumstances. We can experience His presence in unexpected ways. As one persecuted believer said, “The love of Jesus cannot be quarantined.” As we experience God’s presence, His love can freely flow through us to touch others.

6. IDENTIFYING WITH THE SUFFERING OF JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Hebrews 13:3

By remembering God’s actions in history, thinking about how Jesus felt before and during His crucifixion and all that happened to Paul in the early church, pastors were able to identify with and find encouragement in the suffering of Christ and his disciples.

Isolation allows us to identify a little more easily with those who are persecuted because of their faith. Identifying with the suffering of Jesus and His disciples, can bring us closer to those who are suffering, whatever the cause of their suffering.

7. BELIEVE IN A GREATER GOAL

“Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.” Philippians 1:12

What is striking in Paul’s writings is his heavenly perspective. He seems to ask himself two questions – ones that we would do well to ask ourselves at every turn: What is God able to do with this? How can the circumstances of my life and the world around me serve to advance the Gospel?

We trust that this booklet has been helpful and encouraging to you. For more resources, please check out our website: www.opendoorsca.org



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JESUS CANNOT BE
QUARANTINED."**

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www.opendoorsca.org
opendoorsca@odcan.org
(905) 636-0944

Open Doors Canada
8-19 Brownridge Rd.
Halton Hills, ON L7G 0C6

Registered Charity No 11906 8799 RR0001

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