

January 2014

This is what the Lord says— he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

--Isaiah 43: 16, 18-19

*The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.*

--Isaiah 9: 2

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

--Hebrews 4: 14-16

International—It is only fitting to begin 2014 by giving thanks for the way in which God has sustained those who are oppressed, is compassionate and sympathetic to all our suffering, and has made a way of salvation through Jesus Christ. We are especially grateful for the freedom of those released from prison in 2013, a few of whom are Farhad Sabokrouh, Naser Zamen-Dezfuli, and Mostafa Mohammad Bordbar—Christians in Iran, and Iranian human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh; Chinese Christian Yang Xuan; Yorm Bopha, a Cambodian housing rights activist (released on bail); and Eva Abdallah, a Christian teenager from Tanzania. (*Source: PrisonerAlert.com; Amnesty International*)

Egypt—Mohammed Hegazy, known by his Christian name, Bishoy Armia Boulos, was arrested on December 11 in Minya. Boulos was the first Christian convert in Egypt to file a lawsuit to have his conversion recognized by the state and his ID card legally changed. Because of this, and the notoriety that followed, he was arrested and charged with working for a Christian satellite station and other “anti-government activities.” Boulos has faced many trials since his conversion. Previously he was arrested, tortured, and received death threats. He has lived in hiding and is less safe in prison, as Muslim prisoners intended to kill him. Pray for his spiritual and physical protection. Pray that his persecutors may meet the love of Christ in this “famous” believer. (*Source: The Voice of the Martyrs*)

China/Tibet—Imagine getting a six-year prison sentence for merely making a film. That was the recent fate of Tibetan filmmaker, Dhondup Wangchen, whose film that looked at Tibetan views toward the Beijing Olympics and the Dalai Lama caused him to be accused of “subversion to the state.” Subjected to a secret trial and torture, Dhondup Wangchen has been denied basic rights, such as adequate legal counsel, a fair and impartial hearing, and protection of his physical and mental well-being. Pray that he will be preserved throughout this ordeal. Pray that he might encounter Christians similarly imprisoned for their beliefs, but who have a hope that extends beyond this life. Pray for those in authority, who out of fear and a desire to maintain control and power, choose to oppress and abuse those they are meant to protect. Pray for government officials and prison guards, that all might come to choose light over darkness. Pray especially for President Xi Jinping. (*Source: Amnesty International*)

Pakistan—The ordeal of Pakistani Christian Adnan Prince began this past fall when he filled in for his

brother at work and happened upon a controversial book, *I Asked the Bible Why the Qur'ans Were Set on Fire* (*Mein ney Bible sey poocha Qur'an kyun jaley* in Urdu), which was written by Maulana Ameer Hamza, leader of Jamat-ud-Dawa, a political arm of the jihadi organization Lashkar-e-Taiba that claimed responsibility for the 2008 Mumbai bombings. In it, Adnan Prince, who holds a master's degree in English, found erroneous information about the Bible, and in response made a few notes in the book to correct the misinformation. However, this was observed by a coworker, who took offense and reported Adnan Prince to the police for "insulting Islam." Initially, he fled, knowing that he would be arrested, but when his family members were arrested instead he returned immediately. Despite Adnan Prince's adamant assertions that he wrote nothing offensive and only corrected errors regarding the Bible, he was arrested and is awaiting trial. He has been tortured and threatened with death.

Throughout this ordeal, the broader Christian community has also faced greater intimidation, such as the Christian colony in Wassanpura, who received threats from local extremists that they must abandon their homes or be burned out. Pray for this believer, his family, and his community that they would face these trials with the peace and courage of Christ, that they would feel His presence, and that they would be guided by the Holy Spirit to be wise, discerning, and forgiving as they interact with officials, police, and the larger community. Pray for those who seek to use violence against those with whom they disagree. Pray for the light and love of Christ to permeate this place. (*Source: Open Doors*)

Bangladesh/United States—If it weren't bad enough that Walmart, Sears, Children's Place and other companies use factory workers who labor in dangerous and often brutal conditions for poverty-level wages, now they will not even help compensate workers and families victimized by the factory disasters that occurred in Bangladesh while they and others turned a blind eye. Over a year has passed since the Tazreen factory fire, which killed 112 workers and the Rana Plaza building collapse, which claimed the lives of an astounding 1,129 individuals, and not one American manufacturer known to use these suppliers has stepped up with any offers of compensation to workers who were paralyzed or severely injured or families who lost the breadwinner in these tragic events. This stands in stark and disheartening contrast to several European companies who have already paid sums to victims and their families, citing their moral obligation to these people. It is significant also to note that prior to these and other similar disasters, workers had lodged complaints about the dangerous structural conditions of their workplaces only to be threaten with firing if they did not report to work. In the case of the Rana Plaza collapse, the disaster happened the very next day. Pray that American companies will live up to the ideals and standards that we espouse to as a nation, change course, and financially compensate individuals who have lost so much more than their livelihoods. Give thanks for the moral response and example of several European companies. Pray that consumers in the West, especially those Christians, might become informed, conscientious purchasers, and use their economic power to cause manufacturers to operate ethically and morally. (*Source: The New York Times*)

Iran—More than a year ago, 61-year-old Pastor Vruir Avanesian was arrested at a private Christmas celebration, but he just received his sentence this past December 5. Though he has been a pastor for 17 years in the officially recognized Assemblies of God Church in Iran and is an Armenian Christian—the largest Christian minority in Iran—he was sentenced to three and a half years for "anti-government activities and the promotion of ideas contrary to the sanctity of the Islamic Republic of Iran." This sentence is especially concerning because Pastor Avanesian suffers from heart and kidney disease, and needs dialysis three times a week. Pray for his physical, spiritual, and emotional sustenance. Pray for the strength, courage, and perseverance of his congregation. Pray that his suffering will not be in vain, but that his witness will be used by God to bring others to Him. (*Source: The Voice of the Martyrs*)

South Sudan—After decades of struggling for independence, the stability of the new nation of South Sudan has now been threatened as violence erupted there in mid-December. In just a few weeks, the

conflict—which appears to have both political and potentially ethnic motivations—has claimed the lives of more than 1,000 people and displaced at least 81,000. Pray for wisdom, integrity, and restraint for all leaders involved, especially for President Salva Kiir, ousted vice-president Riek Machar, and peace-negotiation delegate, Rebecca Nyandeng. Pray for the families of those killed or injured in the fighting. Pray for peace in this troubled region, and that Christians there might be a force of goodness and forgiveness. Pray especially for the children of South Sudan, who have already seen too much violence and are spending their childhoods in a place that is incredibly unsafe. *(Source: BBC)*

Mexico—For decades, Christian churches and leaders have worked in Mexico without any direct interference from organized crime, which is deeply entrenched in Mexico. However, disturbing reports, especially from the west coast of Mexico, indicate that the picture is changing. The main cartel, Gulf Cartel, has traditionally refrained from attacking the general population, but the Zetas Cartel is known to be indiscriminate in its violent and ritual killings. Their attacks have prohibited Christian workers from visiting more remote churches in the region, they have threatened to wipe out entire villages, including local churches and congregations, and they have begun recruiting kids, luring them with gifts and eventually drugs. This has stopped certain families from attending church for fear their children will be targeted for recruitment. In one case, a pastor was driven from the home he was living in by gunmen and told that they would be taking the house and all the possessions. Despite the disheartening and terrifying circumstances, two months later, the pastor felt compelled to pray for these gunmen and two days after that they came to the pastor saying they intended to return the house and pay for the damage they had caused. Pray that these kinds of miraculous answers to prayer would continue. Pray that the small Christian communities scattered throughout the west coast of Mexico would find courage to continue their work and witness, and would be the force of change and influence in the region, rather than the corrosive influence of drugs and crime. Pray for God's hand of protection on Christian workers who routinely travel to visit small congregations. Pray for those involved with the cartels, that they might find the salvation and transforming power of Jesus. *(Source: Open Doors)*

Syria—In the ongoing strife in Syria, the historic Christian town of Ma'aloula came under attack at the very end of November. By December 2, it appeared that the area was under the control of forces opposed to the government. This assault also affected the Greek Orthodox St. Thecla Convent and several churches. Some reports indicated that many of the nuns, and the children who lived in the orphanage they ran, were relocated, but others reported that the Mother Superior and a few other nuns stayed on. There are now reports that the nuns who remained have been taken hostage by extremists, however others claim they have only been removed for their own safety. Because of the complexity and danger of the conflict, it has been incredibly difficult to ascertain the true number of those missing and their actual circumstances, but pray that whatever the specifics, God's hand of protection will be over the nuns, and especially any children in their care. Pray that leaders will act with mercy, justice, and integrity. Continue to pray for the two bishops kidnapped in April, a monk missing since August, and other Christians taken hostage during the fighting. Pray that the nuns, clergy, and other believers will sense the presence of God in their ordeal. Pray that the Geneva convention will lead to progress in resolving the crisis in Syria, and that the international community will have the will to act, be wise, and take appropriate, helpful action for delivering humanitarian aid. *(Source: Middle East Concern)*

Bangladesh—National elections often put Christians and other minorities at risk of violent attacks before and afterward. Pray that throughout this season, but especially on election day, January 5, the peace of God, which transcends understanding, will reign, the vulnerable will be protected, and the elections will bring an even more just, fair, and civil society. *(Source: Christian Solidarity Worldwide)*